

# Down by the Sông Sàigòn

*I. Van Laningham*

*Large-scale maps of the DMZ with sufficient detail to show homes and huts in addition to highways and rivers show a unique notation by the names of villages: "Cầm Phô: destroyed." "Thuy Bin: destroyed." "Tông Luat: destroyed."*

**May, 1970, Year of the Metal Dog**

He came to Củ Chi with the May monsoons, when vast sheets of heavy warm rain fell like great grey veils everywhere South of the DMZ, filling the paddies, flattening palms by the grove. Ritchie and I picked him up in Long Binh at Company HQ in our Jeep, Ritchie driving, me armed with the grenade launcher. We passed Long Binh Jail and prayed we'd never be so stupid as to end up inside. We drove drenched, even though the top was up, until we made it to Phú Cường Bridge and the **"STOPPING THROUGH RED SIGNAL DISOBEY MUST BE KILLED"** sign, when the sun came out. We would be allowed to cross the baby Sông Sàigòn when and only when the guard with the bazooka told us to go. As we waited for the opposing traffic to cross the one-lane bridge on highway 8A, Staff Sergeant A.Q. Jones reached into his duffle and pulled out a bottle. "How about a drink?"

"I knew there was something I liked about you, Scar," I said, taking the bourbon from him and drinking. I'm Andrea Holmes, SP4, 23, and the clerk for Company B, 369th Signal Battalion, Củ Chi Detachment. I'm a six-foot-one blonde who has yet to turn down booze. I drank, wiped the top with my left hand and passed it over to Ritchie, who was grinning like a fool. We had lucked out; we were getting a second-in-command who wasn't a lifer.

"Scar?" he asked.

"Ever see Stewart Granger as André Moreau in *Scaramouche*?"

"You know, I just might have, years ago. Didn't Granger play some kind of Robin Hood character?"

“Close enough, Sergeant Scaramouche; you look just like him, only blond.” He even sounded like Granger, although he wore jungle fatigues instead of Hollywood’s idea of French Revolutionary clothes, and carried a .38, not an epeeé. “You can call me Andi,” I said.

By the time we made it back to the compound, Scar had come to like his new nickname, the rains had stopped, the sun and the rainbows were out, and we were dry, in a sense. We were the best of buddies, and more than a little lubricated. Sergeant First Class Hutch didn’t notice; that’s what the three of us told each other, anyway.

Hutch told me one night when we were drinking together that Scar had lost two puppies in a row to distemper, back in Đã Nẵng; I’d wondered why he tried to make friends with every dog he met.

**Sunday, 16 August, 1970**

In August, with the monsoons nearly gone, the sun baking the land into hot gritty dust, the mosquitoes were reduced to an almost bearable level. Scar and I both had five months left incountry, two-and-a-half to go before we would receive orders to deactivate the signal lines and close the place down. When dispatches had to go to Sài Gòn and Long Binh, Scar usually got the chore of hauling them, and I would ride shotgun with my grenade launcher. He banged on the door one Sunday morning at 0600 and asked, “You speak Vietnamese, right?” Unlike most GIs, he didn’t say “Gook.” Maybe he was being sensitive, or maybe he was being let’s-not-piss-Andi-off-’cause-I-want-something-from-her, but he didn’t say it.

“Tôi nói được một ít,” I said, and yawned. I speak a little.

“Grab your gear, we’re going to Sài Gòn,” he said. “Long Binh tomorrow.” He handed me a bottle.

I looked at it; it was tequila from Mexico, which his sister Serena, who lived in Harlingen, Texas and who was married to the law, sent him in the mail. “Shaving lotion,” she would label the boxes. Precious stuff; I shoved it into my refrigerator for later and wondered what he wanted. I grabbed my camera, a cold soda and my M79, and went out to join Scar in the Jeep. By 0700, it was already hot, and I loved it. If there were a way I could take the climate back to Chicago with me, I would have been willing to pay most anything.

We headed straight Southeast on Quốc Lộ Một, Highway One, from Củ Chi to Sài Gòn; I enjoyed the breeze in the open Jeep. One of the disadvantages of being stationed in Củ Chi was that there was no wind. It reached 110° year round, and Sài Gòn wasn’t noticeably cooler. I liked the heat, but even for me, there was such a thing as too much still air.

We crossed Hóc Môn bridge and I passed Scar my canteen while I snapped pictures. Just a couple of years ago the bridge was where any vehicle could count on taking fire. Since Tết, however, the highways had become almost safe, or as safe as highways ever were. Before, the 35 kilometres to the city might have taken two days and a tank convoy. There were many reasons to be glad to be in the post-Tết war.

Scar unscrewed the top and took a drink. “Whew,” he whispered. It wasn’t tequila, but it was far better than water. “That was a surprise.” He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his fatigue shirt.

I lit a cigarette and watched the road scroll by. Traffic was getting heavier; bicycles, Lambrettas and 4CVs, trucks and military vehicles were crowding the road—one of the busiest in the country. I swigged from the canteen and handed it back to him. We began passing more cyclos, rickshaw-like modified bicycles with two front wheels and a seat big enough for a person between them.

Scar took a deep breath. “I have a favor to ask, and you can say no. But I know you’re not going to tell me what I want to hear.” I grinned, both because he was right and because I knew the favor had something to do with sex; why else would he have given me such expensive tequila?

We drove around a checkpoint; Vietnamese vehicles had to stop, we—US Military—didn’t. He adjusted his hat. “I’ve been seeing this girl at the Hollywood Bar on Two Dough street, near where we’re delivering this stuff.” He thumbed at the dispatch pouch in the back seat. “And—” He looked at me. “Can I have another drink?”

“Get to the point,” I said, but I handed him the canteen. He braked to avoid a cyclo and a Lambretta.

“Yeah, sorry. I want to marry her,” he said. “I want her to give up what she’s doing and go back to the States with—”

“You what?” I stared. “You’re in *love*?” It was so unlike who I thought he was that I was stunned.

“C’mon. I’m a human being.” He reddened.

“No you’re not. You’re a Sergeant.” I looked at him in surprise. “What do you need me for?”

He sighed. “I want to make certain she loves me. I don’t want to take her back if she’s going to dump me once she gets to the States.”

“What makes you think you want to marry her? That’s a really rough trip, you know, even if everything works out all right. Plus, it’s a boatload of paperwork.” Most of which I would get to do, I thought sourly.

“I know that. It’s gonna be nasty, but I’m willing to go through with it if she loves me as much as I love her. I think she does, and her brother Hawk says she does, but ... I want to be *absolutely* certain.” He slowed as the traffic increased. “Besides, I think there’s something wrong with her brother. He’s threatened to kill me a couple of times over nothing; he’s either a junkie or he’s crazy. I can’t trust anything he says”

“I’m no linguist,” I said, although Mama-san said I was doing much better than she thought I would, and that I had a good ear for the tones. I hadn’t insulted her terribly for weeks.

“You’re better than I am.” Which was saying nothing; his language training came from Saturday morning cartoons and misheard insults. The few times I’d heard him try speaking any Vietnamese, it had been like nails on a blackboard. Scar was as tone-deaf as anyone I’d ever met; here, it mattered.

“I’m liable to tell your sweetheart to go kiss a water buffalo.”

He snorted. “If she gets mad and tells me off—well, that’s my answer, isn’t it?”

I thought about that one for a while and had a drink. I passed him the canteen. Finally, I said, “This ought to be interesting. How long have you known her?”

“I came incountry at Ton Sun Newt,” he said, mangling the name of the Sài Gòn airport. “I stayed in the Koepler Hotel in Saigon the first three nights until they sent me up to Danang. I went to the bars. A lot.” Đứ Nẵg was in C Company, where he’d transferred from, up North, close to the DMZ.

We were in the thick of traffic now, on Lê Đại Hành street by Phú Thọ racetrack, which hadn’t been used since Tết. It had been badly damaged during the VC occupation. Coming toward us was a 40s-vintage Dodge truck, burdened down with huge wide rolls of rice mat sail meant for the junks and dhows down at Nha Bè, where all the oil tankers tied up.

From there, it was a good thing Scar knew where we were going, because I was completely lost. I could get us from Củ Chi to the city—there’s only one road you *can* take—but once there someone else had to take over. I couldn’t even find Tụ Do street or Đức Bà Cathedral except by accident.

Of course, once you did find Đức Bà, Tụ Do was easy. You walked straight out the front doors of the church in the heart of Sài Gòn, past the statue of the Virgin Mary, across Nguyễn Du street, and there you were on Tụ Do street, in the most famous red-light district in the world. Walk straight down the street, cross Lê Lợi, keep going for a mile, past the Parliament Building with its drooping potted plants—hookers go where business is good—and you came to Bến Bạch Đằng, the quay that paralleled the Sông Sài Gòn, where you could watch the big ships on the other shore being loaded and unloaded, and sometimes, if the breeze was right, smell the ocean.

We found a street vendor selling submarine sandwiches and bought two, along with a couple of warm Pepsis. We found a table under palms near the rich brown river and watched cargo on the far shore being swung over gunwales onto dry land and said very little. There were benches where we could sit and have lunch a few feet from the river. Here in the heart of the city, the banks were paved; on the opposite shore, the ground was covered with trucks and tanks and other war cargo. The tables sat in the shade, underneath palm trees, or sheltered by banyans or tamarinds, figs or bougainvillea. If there were none of those new container ships in your immediate view, it was easy to think you were back fifty or a hundred years, when Saigòn was the Paris of the Orient and the Vietnamese in their white coats and crisp uniforms were relegated to silent waitery duties. The many French loan words helped perpetuate the myth, at least until you heard some of the bargirls swearing in English.

Neither one of us bothered to pick the weevils out of the baguettes; there were far too many of them and they had no taste anyway. “What kind of meat is this?” he finally asked, eyeing his sandwich uneasily.

“See those orange things? Those are pieces of pig ear. The grey stuff is pork.” I watched him. “Not dog. You don’t have to worry.” There’s not a lot of dog meat sold in the South; it’s much more popular in the North, but I didn’t tell him so.

He swallowed. “Thanks, Andi.”

Which was the first time he’d ever called me by my first name, even though I’d told him to, months ago. I’m sure he meant the thanks; he was thinking of trying to get a new puppy, and I hoped the third time would be the charm. We sat and enjoyed the sun and the slight wind off the river. Two women wearing mirrored sunglasses, arm-in-arm under the same bright red parasol, walked by. The short-haired one carrying the umbrella was wearing a black-and-white áo dài, while her friend, with thick black hair to her knees, was wearing cobalt blue. Both áo dàis ended right above the ankle; traditional áo dàis touched the ground. In Vũng Tàu, some of the bargirls had worn the traditional length, but I rarely saw it here; I didn’t know why. Scar watched the two women with interest. I wondered if they were lesbians; I pushed the thought away.

“Let’s get going,” said Scar. “Time to get to work.”

I stuffed our trash into a paper bag. I felt like I was fighting a lost cause, trying to pick up after ourselves, since Saigòn seemed more like the litter and smog than the governmental capital of South Việt Nam. We climbed back into our Jeep and drove up Tụ Do, turned into an alley, and parked in front of a five-story building. Scar dropped off the dispatches while I waited outside, guarding the vehicle.

An hour later, we pulled up in front of the big blue sign: “**HOLLYWOOD**,” it said, and “**(VỆ NỮ Bar Hotel)**” below that. From the door under the sign walked a woman who looked nothing like my preconceptions. For one thing, she was dressed not in a minidress or an áo dài, but in a plain, periwinkle blue cheongsam. For another, she

wore glasses with thin wire frames; I guess one of my stereotypes is that hookers don't wear glasses. She had short, impeccably styled hair, shell-pink lipstick and very light makeup. She could have walked out of almost any business in the Loop at lunchtime, where the only second glances she would have attracted would have been because she was so easy to look at. She was worth staring at, but I tried not to. I thought she might be 28, between me and Scar, and around four foot ten.

“Chào chị,” she said, bowing slightly. Hello, older sister. “I am honored to meet you.” I grinned at her. Older sister, hah. It's true that in Vietnamese society, it is more respectful to assume age instead of youth, but I still thought she was being snotty. She looked at Scar.

“Uh, yeah,” he mumbled. “Um, Lam Ann Kew, this is Andi Holmes.” His voice trailed off.

She smiled at him and turned back to me, correcting his pronunciation. “Lam Anh Kiều. Last time I saw him,” Kiều said in Vietnamese, “he asked if we could go somewhere else to talk.”

I wondered how he had asked. Probably through other bargirls whose English was better. “Where should we go?”

“The Hotel Majestic,” she said. “It has a lovely view from the rooftop garden. On good days, you can see Vũng Tàu.”

Scar was looking blank and left out. “She said you wanted to go someplace else,” I said. “Is the Majestic OK?”

He was watching her. “Sure.” He helped Kiều into the Jeep—something that, thankfully, he'd never done with me; I might have socked him. “Ang lie?” he asked her. It took me a minute to figure out that he meant “Lại anh không?” Is your brother coming?

She shook her head and looked at me. “Tell him no, my brother won't be coming; he is ill.” She smiled. I tried not to stare at her flawless skin. She smelled faintly of vanilla.

“Scar, how on earth did you manage to fall in love with this woman?” I asked, when we were pulling out into the street. “You can't even say thank you.” I didn't think Kiều was any better off in English than he was in tiếng Việt.

“Can too. Cam unh. So there.”

Kiều giggled and touched me on the arm. “Was he trying to say thank you?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Terrible, isn't he?” I didn't want her to touch me any more. I liked it too much.

We drove to 1 Tụ Do street, at the intersection of Tụ Do with Bến Bạch Đằng, and found a place to park. We went through the front door and into the lobby, which struck me as tiny; it should have been three times the size it was. I wondered if the place had been remodeled. We rode the old-fashioned elevator with the wrought-iron gate to the roof, where we took a table in the garden and a small Vietnamese woman in a French maid's uniform took our drink order. Kiều ordered tea, but Scar and I both asked for bourbon, straight up. Our drinks arrived; when the waitress had gone, we clinked our glasses together. I had never seen anyone so utterly smitten as Scar.

I waited for him to say something, but it was plain that he would have been happy to sit and watch Kiều all day. So would I, in other circumstances. "Scar, maybe you can keep this secret for a while, but once you start sending in the paperwork it's all over. Everyone will know."

"I know that," he said, looking into his drink, which he had hardly touched. "I didn't want the guys to start hassling me until I'd done something irrevocable."

"What you're saying is you think you can still back out."

He looked straight at Kiều for a long time. "No," he said, finally. "I can't."

"Then do you really need my help?"

"Yes!" It came out with enough force to make Kiều jump. "Um. Sorry." He looked at me sheepishly. "I need to know. That's all. I just need to know." Yeah, and I bet he was prepared to take my advice.

"Then why don't you take a little walk? Leave us alone for a half-hour or so."

He nodded, leaned over to kiss Kiều, and left.

I turned to her and waited. She shifted in her seat. Finally, she asked, "What do I have to say to convince you?" Now that Scar was gone, she looked a good deal more vulnerable. I wondered if that were an act. She obviously knew why I was along, although I'm sure Scar had never told her, not in so many words.

"In America, we have a myth about the whore with a heart of gold," I said. When I said "đĩ" she flinched. I had to explain what "heart of gold" meant. "Men really want to believe that story, even when they've never met a whore like that. Even when no one they know ever met a whore like that. That's what a myth is. Nothing real."

She sat very still and very straight and said nothing for a long time, her face closed. She put her drink on the small table. "Should I leave now, before Al returns?"

"Al" had to be Scar. "No," I said. "But you should tell me the truth. You don't love him, do you?" I used "yêu" for love.

She sighed. “Yes,” she said. “I do love him.” But the word she used, “tình cảm,” meant affection. “Perhaps not the way you mean.”

I thought I saw what was going on. “How bad do you want to leave Việt Nam?”

She looked me in the eye. “I will do what it takes,” she said. “I think I have proved that already.” Becoming a hooker in the U.S. was a bad thing; in Việt Nam, it was far worse, because it was a society that had been puritanical for longer than the USA had been in existence—a society that had never heard of the sexual revolution. Parents disowned daughters when they became hookers, and when daughters who became hookers became the only source of income for a family, families were ripped apart. In our little run-down war, the American GIs simply assumed that all the women were prostitutes. Most even assumed that enlisted women like me were there to service them. Only the nurses, there to save lives, escaped such assumptions, and they, of course, were seen as angels. It was all very tiresome.

Kiều looked at me cautiously. “I would not leave my country with someone I did not trust.” She took a small drink of tea. “Why are you here?” she asked me.

“What? Because Scar asked me to come.” I thought about it for a second. “Scar’s my friend.” I wasn’t absolutely sure that was the truth, but it was close enough.

“I meant, why are you here, in my country? American women aren’t required to come to this war.”

It was my turn to look at her for a long time. “It doesn’t matter,” I said. I didn’t want to say, “I used to be patriotic,” because I didn’t want to explain why I wasn’t any longer.

“It does matter. To me, it matters very much.”

“My older brother died in Tết,” I said. There was no need to say, “1968 Tết.” When you spoke of Tết and death, that was the only year that mattered. “So I enlisted. Then my little brother said he was going to enlist.” I shrugged. “They try not to send family members incountry at the same time, so I volunteered to come here, to keep Josh out.” He had been sent to Germany as an MP and was spending his off-hours pub-crawling in Giessen, with the occasional side-trip to Berchtesgaden; he seemed to have picked up some of my habits. His last letter to me had contained a picture, which I knew he hadn’t sent to Mom and Dad, of him with a plump blonde Fräulein, both of them very happy and very drunk. One of her hands was tangled in his red hair, and I had wondered if she were going to be my sister-in-law.

“So you have no positive reasons to be here. Only negative ones.”

I stared at her. “No. No, that’s not true.”

“Isn’t it true that if I were looking only for bad reasons, I would see only bad reasons?”

After a while, I nodded.

“So maybe I have bad reasons and good reasons both?” She waited for me.

“So what are the good ones?”

“Maybe I don’t love Al the way you think I ought to,” she said. “But he needs and wants a wife; I will be the best wife he could ever have.” I didn’t doubt that she meant it, but I wondered what else was going on. She continued: “I look around and I see corruption everywhere. I see my country cut in half by a war we did not ask for, a war that benefits only politicians, scum like Diệm and Thiệu. In the US, you have a good life. No one bombs you, no one shoots at you. No one looks down on you. Why wouldn’t I want to go there?”

She might have said more, but there was a noise at the elevator, interrupting her. I assumed that it was Scar returning until I heard rapid Vietnamese. I started to turn toward the voice, but not before I caught a brief flash of fear on Kiêu’s face.

The man who was advancing on us was a little older than Kiêu, maybe thirty, which would put him at about Scar’s age. He was smiling, but that was clearly for my American eyes, since the things he was saying to her didn’t match the smile. And there was something about him that made me very, very nervous.

Besides the stuff about why hadn’t she told him where she was going, I heard “chó cái”—another word for prostitute—and some other choice terms. I heard Scar mentioned; then he used another phrase I didn’t get. I knew it wasn’t an endearment, but I hadn’t the faintest idea what it meant. When he tired of cutting her down and turned to me to hold out his hand in the American style, I put on an act. The one where you’re too stupid to learn a language and too arrogant to admit it.

I took his hand and said, in the broadest Yankee accent I could muster, “Howdy, pardner! I’m pleased ta meetcha.” Or the tiếng Việt equivalent, anyway. When he introduced himself as Lam Van Học, I pretended to only get part of what he said and called him “Mr. Lamb” instead of “Mr. Học.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kiêu relax. I could almost see Học thinking, “this round-eye will be easy to fool.”

I wondered what was going on. “We speak English,” he said. “I pleased meet you. How you?” English and Vietnamese are so different that it’s difficult not to sound like a dolt in whichever language you weren’t born into, no matter how smart you are. He was tall for a Vietnamese, five foot seven or so, but with a typical slim build. You rarely saw fat Vietnamese. I didn’t know whether it was the healthy diet or the abject poverty. In his case, maybe it was the chain-smoking; he lit a new cigarette from the butt of an old one.

Ugly American that I was, I insisted on practicing my wretched tiếng Việt on him. “Good I. You how?” I supposed it would be too broad a joke if I sprayed saliva on him

while talking. He struck me as the sort who would be very upset, even though tiếng Việt encourages spitting, what with all those forceful *th*'s.

We carried on in our respective mangled versions of each other's languages. Since I couldn't stand a lot of this, it was lucky that Scar came back right then. "Chow ong," he said to Hộc. That was supposed to be "Hello, Mr."

The waitress in the uniform came up then, and took drink orders from Hộc. I asked for a refill; Kiều asked for a Singapore Sling, please. And Hộc got down to business with Scar.

It turned out that the reason Kiều was still working at the Hollywood Bar was because Scar didn't want to pay what Hộc was asking to replace what she was earning. "Support mother, father, younger brothers," claimed Hộc. I wondered what was wrong with his earning power, but chastised myself. I had no idea what the real situation was, even though I couldn't escape the feeling that these money-hungry relatives were imaginary. What was supposed to happen if she quit? In really terrible tiếng Việt, I asked Kiều what she planned to do.

She looked at me with a puzzled expression. "I will move to Củ Chi," she said. "Of course."

"All of Quận Củ Chi is off limits," I said. "Every village in the district."

"January is not so long to wait," she said. "Al will be going home then, and I will go with him." She paused a second. "I hope."

If she moved there, we both knew that Scar would find a way to visit, off-limits be damned. I thought to myself that she could make a relationship work if anyone could. The question was, why? Just to get to the States? I saw the way she looked at Scar; maybe it wasn't love, but there was real affection there. I still wondered what there was in Việt Nam to drive her away.

"Mỗi đêm bao nhiêu tiền?" I asked. How much do you charge per night? She looked startled and opened her mouth to say something, paused. Then named a figure that indicated she ought to be a rich woman, even accounting for the support of several people. I glanced at Hộc, who was deep in conversation with Scar, and she nodded slightly. Hộc might be her brother in the sight of law, but I had the distinct impression that she thought of him as a human mosquito.

I stood up, taking my drink, and walked over to the edge where I could lean through the greenery on the railing, facing off toward Vũng Tàu. Kiều came with me; Scar and Hộc were still talking, ignoring us. I lit a cigarette and offered it to her. "I don't smoke," she said.

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “It’s a filthy habit.” I watched the horizon. After a minute, I asked, “Do you charge Scar?”

“I must,” she said, after a tiny pause. “Học would kill me if I didn’t.”

She wasn’t kidding. I lowered my voice. “How did he know where to find you?”

“This is one of my favorite places,” she said, looking off across the river. The three million people of Sài Gòn seemed very far away. “I come here whenever I can.”

I finished my cigarette, but stayed leaning against the wall; I started another one. “Will you answer a personal question?”

She smiled faintly. “What question have you asked that hasn’t been personal?”

I inhaled. “Why do you move as if you are afraid you will break?”

Silence. “I don’t know what—”

“—You’re talking about. Nuts.” I waited.

“I’m fine.”

“Has he been hitting you? What will Al think when he sees bruises tonight?”

There was silence for a long time. She sipped from her drink and stared off across the river. “He won’t see them. Học knows how to hit without leaving marks.” She paused. “Not many, anyway.”

I made my decision. I put my hand on hers and felt the warmth of her skin. She looked up at me, startled. “It’ll be OK,” I said. “We’ll get you out of here.” It had been a mistake to touch her; I didn’t want to let go.

She moved her other hand and squeezed mine. “Cám ơn nhiều lắm,” she whispered. Thank you very much. The relief in her voice was as solid and real as the wall in front of us. She shook a little. “I am in your debt,” she said, looking up into my face.

“Không có chi,” I said; it’s nothing. I tried moving my hand away, but she held on.

“I mean it,” she said. “I owe you more than I can possibly pay.”

I stole a glance over my shoulder where the men were still talking. “Truly,” I said. “It’s nothing.” She let go of me and I missed her touch. I didn’t want to feel that way, but I didn’t want her to keep holding my hand, either. I noticed that her face was flushed. I changed the subject.

“Which way is Vũng Tàu?” I asked. “Can I see it today? I was stationed there for two months.”

She looked off to the Southeast. “It’s not a good day,” she said. “We should think about food.”

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Dinner was a trial. Scar and Hợc fought about the money and ended up furious at each other, leaving it to us women to try to wheedle them out of their tantrums. I hated that. Who made them gods? I especially hated trying to talk sense into Hợc; I wasn’t impressed with his self-control and didn’t want to risk setting him off.

But I didn’t mind getting to know Kiều a little, and I minded even less looking at her. We moved quickly from “Miss Kiều” and “Miss Anh Đi” to first names only. At one point, I remember staring at her mouth and wondering how her lipstick would taste. I could only marvel at her perfectly groomed appearance—did she pluck out every hair that strayed?—which contrasted so dramatically with Hợc’s, who looked as if he had just crawled out of bed. His behaviour was even stranger than his appearance; he grew more and more frenetic as the night went on, until he excused himself, leaving Scar, Kiều and me without him for almost twenty minutes. When he finally came back, he seemed markedly calmer.

After we left, Hợc returned to his own apartment, several blocks away. By the time Scar, Kiều and I got back to the Hollywood, curfew was close and GIs who weren’t totally drunk were hauling out their friends who were and stuffing them in Jeeps so they could try to make it back to their quarters in time. One or two wouldn’t quite make it, but would talk their way past the guards anyway.

The Hollywood was a relatively high-end bar; it had indoor plumbing and a small shower stall at the very back of the building. Kiều showed me to a room that had been used recently; it smelled of sweat and sex. One of the other girls was visiting her family in Huế, she said; I was to sleep there. I had a bottle I’d brought with me and I didn’t care about the smell.

I sat on the bed and took off my boots. Kiều stood in the doorway and watched. I felt reluctant to take off any more clothes. “What’s the matter with your brother?” I asked, slumping back on the bed and taking a drink. She was silent, so I took another. “C’mon, he’s not here. Is he an addict?” I knew that in our post-Tết war, drug addiction had become frighteningly common, both among the remfs and among the ARVN troops. I’d seen it at Vũng Tàu, the two months I’d been there. And at least once today, I’d seen an ARVN Sergeant shooting up on the street, in full view of a group of Catholic schoolgirls in their American-style blue-and-white tartan skirts.

She looked down. “He takes drugs,” she said, softly. “But if he finds out that I told you—”

I started to zip my lips, but stopped; she wouldn't know what the gesture meant. "He won't find out from me," I said. Kiều looked relieved and went upstairs, where she and Scar were sharing her room. I kept drinking until I had drunk enough to pass out.

**Monday, 17 August, 1970**

I awoke, unnerved by the pressure of lips on mine. Before I could speak, I felt fingers on my mouth. In the darkness, I could just make out Kiều, wearing a thin peignoir that didn't hide much.

"Cái gì đó?" I whispered. What is it?

"Học wants to see you."

"Me? What for?"

"It's better if you just go," she said.

"Better for you, you mean." She nodded. Without her glasses, she looked soft and vulnerable, not like the determined woman from the roof of the Majestic. I sat up and tugged on my boots. I slipped my switchblade into the right one and looked at my watch; it was 0200, early enough that I was still more drunk than hung over. "Why did you kiss me?" I asked, tying my laces and speaking to the floor.

She turned her face away. "I couldn't wake you any other way," she said. I knew I slept heavily; I didn't pursue it.

Kiều led me to the back door. She opened it, and pointed. I walked up to Học where he was waiting in a small grassy area; I opened my mouth to say hello in my terrible accent.

He interrupted. "Don't bother; your tiếng Việt is much better than you make it sound."

"How could you tell?" I asked.

"You make too many mistakes."

The only light was from the moon but I could see, close up, wrinkles around his eyes. I revised my estimate of his age upward to thirty-five. He took out a cigarette and offered me one from the pack. I accepted, even though it was one of those awful Vietnamese brands—"Hảo hạng," good quality, hah!—that was rough and harsh, like smoking corn husks. I lit both with my lighter. The temperature was in the low seventies, cold for the Vietnamese and for me. I imagined I could see my breath, but I knew that was the cigarette.

“You must persuade your friend Al to give me what I want.” No reference to the family Kiều was supposedly supporting.

“What makes you think I can persuade him of *anything*?”

“He respects you. That is obvious. And if there is no more money than he is offering, there will be no marriage.”

“What’s to stop Kiều from going to Củ Chi with Scar without your permission?”

He grinned, showing one gold tooth. “He is American military. I can always find him and tell him. And kill her, if necessary.”

“Tell him what?”

“Never mind. You must make him see that he must give me three hundred greenbacks a month.”

“That’s too much money,” I said. Three-quarters of my salary, and a small fortune in the Vietnamese economy. “If he gives you that he will have barely enough left to get Kiều back to the States and too little to build a life when they get there. Why not two hundred? I think he could afford that.”

He glared at me, eyes bulging. “Your soldiers won’t be here forever. My country is bound to lose this war, even if the US wins it, and I don’t think it will. I don’t care if it puts Al in the poorhouse. He will be safe in the US; so will she, but I will be left here with nothing but my money between me and death.” He lit another cigarette and flicked away the other one. A brief gust of wind brought the smell of the river to my nose. For a minute there, I almost sympathized with Hộc.

I finished my own cigarette, field-stripped it and got out one of my B&Hs. My throat was too raw to take another Luxe. “If you don’t tell me what you meant when you said that you would tell Scar something,” I said, “you can forget it. I’ll tell him to drop the whole idea because Kiều doesn’t love him.” I waited for his response, irritated.

He looked at me a long time, puffing away on his Luxe. He used that phrase I hadn’t been able to identify at the hotel, but this time I heard it better. “Cô ấy là người đrn bà đồng tính luyến ái.” She is a woman—and I missed the rest, except for luyến, which is yet another word for love.

“I don’t know what that means. You’re going to have to explain it.”

“Kiều likes girls. She is what you Americans call queer.”

Surprised, I almost touched my lips, but I caught myself in time. Unbidden, a thought surfaced in my mind. “I can love you better.” I felt demons raging in my skull and I

frantically tried to stuff them back into the junk-filled attic I use for a head. It explained a lot, like why she was so desperate to leave the country, why she had kissed me awake. When I had asked her how much she charged, she had probably thought, at first, that I wanted to know how much it would be for me. I got myself under control. “So?”

“Don’t be stupid. You obviously don’t know what it’s like for women like that in this country.”

I took a flying leap. “As bad as it is for men like you?”

“Never say that,” he whispered. “Never.”

My head hurt; I wanted to go back to bed. “Piss off,” I said, and turned to go.

He grabbed my arm and I knocked it away, turned and grabbed him. “If you ask too much you will get nothing,” I said. “Al will get nothing; Kiêu will get nothing. The tanks will roll into Sài Gòn and you won’t be able to bribe your way out. Be reasonable!” I looked at him. “How many women besides Kiêu are you pimping for? You must be making a lot. You won’t even notice the difference between two and three hundred dollars a month.”

He was shouting. “Tôi không ma cô!” I’m not a pimp.

I tried to shush him, but he wasn’t having any. I started to walk away, but he grabbed my arm and yanked me around. He was stronger than he looked. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a gun, an American .38 with a four-inch barrel. “Put that away, you idiot!” I said, backing away.

“I will not be left here to die when the Americans lose the war!” he shouted. “You will make Al give me what I deserve, or I will shoot you!”

“That would be stupid,” I said, but he had stopped listening. I saw him start to aim the gun. I reached down to my boot for my switchblade. He started to shout something else, but I had stopped thinking. His shout turned into a gurgle when my knife caught him in the throat. He fell backward; his lit cigarette dropped into the grass.

The surge of adrenaline left me unable to breathe, my heart pounding. Without thought, my arm had done what was necessary. Without thought, I had killed a man. I had heard that that was what Zen practice was supposed to do for you, but I had never believed it before now. I started to shake. I’m really in trouble now, I thought. My knees weakened, and I was barely able to keep standing.

I wondered how Học had been able to live as long as he had, crazy as he was. Had been. Blood was gushing out of his neck through his severed carotid artery; I heard the ‘ssst!’ as the cigarette went out. I had to get my knife back, but I didn’t dare go near him; my boots would end up covered in his blood. I supposed I could abandon it; even though I

handled it constantly, I doubted that there would be a clear print anywhere on it, since I spent most of my time letting it slide through my fingers. But I was attached to that knife; it had been with me since I was twelve, growing up in Jakarta. I smelled the stink of his bowels letting go.

“Pssst!”

It’s a good thing the switchblade was otherwise occupied, because it was Kiều, still wearing the thin peignoir she had awakened me in, although she’d found her glasses. “Why did you kill him?” Her eyes were huge.

I pointed at the gun. “He was going to kill me, and if he had done it, Scar would have had to shoot him. I saved Scar the paperwork.” I looked at her. “Shouldn’t this make life easier for you?”

But she wasn’t listening. Instead, she slipped off her flip-flops, handed them to me and walked toward the body. “I will get your knife.” She stepped into the pool of blood, which was no longer getting bigger. She squatted and yanked the knife out of Hộc’s neck. She tossed it into the grass outside the bloody area, then the gun. She stood up and walked out of the blood and shuffled her feet back and forth on the clean grass, wiping the blood off them. Then her hands. She took her sandals from me.

“There are cyclos over there,” she said, putting the flip-flops on and pointing. “You should be able to find one to steal. I will get a cloth.”

“Can’t we leave him here?” I asked. I didn’t understand what she planned to do with a cloth, unless she had a whole parachute.

“We will not leave him,” she said, starting toward the Hollywood Bar’s back door. “The police would simply arrest everyone in the closest bar.” That would be the Hollywood. “None of us can afford that.”

I got it. “Should you wake Scar? I mean Al?”

“Do not wake him!” she said, in a voice that commanded. I rubbed my knife on the grass, getting it as clean as I could. I shoved it back in my boot and took off. Cities here aren’t organized the way they are in the States; in the US, the buildings face the street and there’s nothing behind but loading docks and alleys. Here, a block is like a small walled village, with the outside where the shops and businesses face the street. Inside, there are homes, apartment buildings, small businesses that serve only those who live on the block, gardens and paths and tiny parks. And there are only a few ways out of the interior, nearly all of them much too small for cars and trucks. I searched around the edge until I found a place where several cyclos were parked.

I could see why American deserters invested in motorized cyclos; peddling was hard work. It was going to be harder work soon. When I got back, Kiều was busy wrapping

what looked like an old beach towel around Học's neck, her flip-flops off again. She used the towel to drag him backward, out of the pool of his own blood. "Help me lift him," she said. I rolled my sleeves all the way up and helped her haul him into the passenger seat. I put the top up; it was no harder than on any other convertible.

"You must pedal while I hold him up," she said. Inside the bar, she had changed into typical peasant wear, black trousers and a black shirt. She tossed me a black scarf. "Hide your hair with this," she said. She looked at the sky. "I wish the moon were younger; it is even more trouble than your yellow hair." I agreed. Full moons are a lousy time to dispose of bodies.

I felt like a VC when I tied the scarf on firmly. I hadn't worn one since I had been eighteen, the last time I was forced to church with my parents. Kiều climbed into the seat, struggling to cram herself in. Luckily, she didn't take up a lot of space. "Pedal! Toward the river."

I pedalled my butt off. At least the thing didn't squeak or rattle. In the States, we would have used all the alleys we could in heading to the river, but here, that was impossible. We couldn't hope to sneak through all the blocks between the Hollywood and Bến Bạch Đằng, so we had to use Tụ Do street. I thanked whatever was watching over us for the curfew. There were a few streetlights burning here and there, but most businesses, including the hotels, were locked up tight and dark. All the true nightlife here was in the center of the blocks, hidden behind the facades, out of sight of the Americans' prying eyes.

When we finally got to the banks of the Sông Sài Gòn, the breeze had long since died away. The river stank and its mud stank, the dead fish and the floating sewage stank. Kiều suggested I take my boots off, but there was no way I was doing that. We wrestled Học's body out of the cyclo, over the railing and down the paved slope, into the water. Kiều rolled up her trouser legs to just below her crotch, the way peasants in the rice paddies do. She waded into the river past the stone-covered bank and into the ooze of the river bottom. She pushed the body out until it was caught by the current, where it began its silent journey to the Mekong. I hoped it made it all the way to the Delta. Some of the adrenaline in my bloodstream started to flush away, finally, and reaction over what I'd done set in; I trembled.

I helped her back up the slope. It was high tide, and I was grateful for the slippery stone along the river's edge, which hid our tracks. "We can't leave the cyclo here," she said. "The patrols would see it first thing in the morning and start dredging. But I don't think that we should put it back where we got it." She pointed at the mess on the seat.

"Let's try washing it," I said. "I bet we can get it clean enough." We found soda cans nearby and used them to pour stinking river water over the seat and tubing where blood had lodged. There were a couple of places where we had to use our hands; it gave me the crawlies but didn't seem to bother her.

“Do you want me to pedal?” she asked when we thought we were done.

“No, I’m used to it.” I was stronger, too. I pedalled, retracing our route. I tried to make conversation, but she interrupted. “Less talk; more hurry. We still have work to do.”

We went as fast as we dared. We jammed the cyclo back in its spot, checked it for obvious stains, and walked to the Hollywood. I felt as relieved as if I had been going home to Cù Chi, but Kiêu was impatient. “Help me!” she commanded, picking up sand and dirt from the path and tossing it over the bloodstained grass. It wasn’t a perfect job but it wouldn’t be noticed unless someone specifically looked for it.

I lit a cigarette and admired our handiwork. I blew a smoke ring. She said, “I was planning to kill him myself. You saved me a lot of work.” She smiled. “Not all blondes are trouble.”

Kiêu didn’t really say “blonde,” of course—there’s no such word in Vietnamese—but “cô gái vàng tóc.” Yellow-haired girl.

“Was he really your brother?” I asked.

“Half-brother. He was always crazy. His father was—worse,” she said. “I would not be working here if it weren’t for him and his drug habit.” She looked up the alley. “But then, I would not have met Al if I didn’t work here. Maybe I should be grateful.” She turned her face up to me. “Would I like to have a cigarette?”

I grinned. “No,” I said. “No, you wouldn’t.” I looked back at her, then at the ground. “Is it true? What Hộc told me? You like girls?”

She stopped breathing. “I like girls,” she whispered. “If you want, I will—”

I hurried to cut her off and still my heart. “You don’t have to worry. I won’t tell Al. Ever.” I started another cigarette.

“Hộc caught me one time,” she said. “With—”

“You don’t have to say,” I said, cutting her off again.

She was silent, then, until I finished smoking. “We should go in.”

“Yes. And you should get rid of those clothes.” I field-stripped and pocketed the butt. We went in. She came into my room with me, stripped off the wet bloody garments, and shoved them into a cabinet where most of the stink was confined.

“I’ll get rid of them tomorrow,” she said, shrugging into a peignoir. “Before we go to Cù Chi.”

“Don’t you have any family in Sài Gòn?”

“Everything Hộc said about our family was a lie; my mother and father—her second husband—were killed by a rocket in Tết. Like your brother. Now I have no one.” Killed by a rocket meant killed by the VC. She turned to go.

“We should leave early tomorrow, unless you already have a place to live in Củ Chi.”

She nodded. “They won’t know me there, will they?” she asked. I knew she meant that they wouldn’t know what her occupation had been in Sài Gòn. For a moment, I thought—hoped—she would kiss me again. For that moment, I longed to hold her. But I didn’t dare touch her.

“It’ll be very different from the city,” I said. She laughed, and went back to wash off in the shower. I waited until I heard her finish and go upstairs before I went back for my turn. I thought I might go to sleep quickly, since I had worked so hard pedalling. My legs were sore and I was exhausted, but I kept thinking of Kiêu, naked in my room, her skin the color of cocoa butter, one purple-and-yellow bruise on the ribs below her left breast. I remembered the sound Hộc made as he died; I searched for regret, but found none. He had been going to kill me, I knew. Like Kiêu, I had done what I had to do.

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When she came down to wake me three hours later, at dawn, I had been awake the whole time, straining for the sound of geckos chasing insects in the rafters. I was going to have trouble sleeping for a while; I hoped my liquor rations would hold out. There was always the black market, of course. I could have worried about Hutch finding out about Hộc, but I knew he would take care of his people, no matter what.

Kiêu and I hustled Scar out of the Hollywood so fast he hardly had time to wake up; we wouldn’t even let him have coffee. Not until we were halfway out of the city, heading toward Long Binh to pick up the dispatches from Company HQ, did we give him a chance to speak. “What’s going on? I thought Hawk wanted money.”

I ignored him. Kiêu looked back at me blankly. “You’re going to have to learn some English,” I said to her.

She nodded glumly. “I know, but I am not very good at languages.” Secretly, I was a little glad.

Scar grumbled. “Hey, I asked a question! Don’t I get an answer?”

I looked at him. “No,” I said. He opened his mouth to protest and I cut him off. “You don’t want to know.”

He shut up when he looked at me. Later, stuck in traffic waiting to cross the Sông Đồng Nai on a single-lane bridge in Biên Hòa, he turned to me in the back seat and asked, “I guess the answer was yes, huh?”

I just smiled. “Why don’t you and Kiều practice learning each other’s languages?” I field-stripped my cigarette and stuffed the butt into my side pocket. “I’m going to take a nap,” I said, and lay back on the seat. I didn’t want to listen to them; it was already sounding like feeding time at the zoo. I closed my eyes. Before I slept, I wondered where all Học’s money had gone.

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We found a place for Kiều to stay in Tân Hòa, one of the tiny villages in Quận Củ Chi. It wasn’t much, but it would see her through the next five months. She had Học’s gun and Scar had promised to bring her more ammo. “And clothes!” I told him. “You can’t leave her out here with just two lousy outfits.” He handed her all the MPC in his wallet. She made him take some back, but I could see that he wasn’t going to be buying me drinks anytime soon.

Back at the 369th, I realized that I had no pictures of her, so I made Scar promise to take me to see her sometime soon. I thought he’d be visiting pretty quick. If he didn’t, I’d bet my liquor ration that she’d turn up at the Detachment gate with a mouthful of firecrackers, as they say in tiếng Việt.

We gave SFC Hutch the dispatches from HQ. “Any trouble?” he asked Scar.

“Nope. Not a bit.”

“It’s about time.” He eyed me. “You find out what he’s been hiding?” he asked.

“Uh, no, Sarge.” I hadn’t known Hutch knew something was up, but I wasn’t about to say anything before Scar did. Scar didn’t.

“Get out of here,” he said, looking disgusted.

We walked over to Ilikai East and found the place deserted. We didn’t know what was going on until Carol, who ran the club, said, “Haven’t you heard? One of the Donut Dollies was murdered last night.” Donut Dollies were women hired by the Red Cross to go out to the artillery firebases outside the perimeter and entertain troops. Often, they were the only round-eyes the arty guys saw during their entire year. People didn’t give them any credit, but going out to firebases wasn’t something I would have done.

“We were in Sài Gòn and just got back,” said Scar. “Who was it?”

“Ginny Kirsch,” she said. “She’d only been here a week.” She shook her head. I remembered seeing Ginny just once; we lived in different worlds. “One of the GIs snuck

in, with guards all around, and stabbed her to death.” She shuddered. “I’m going to start double-bolting my door.”

We tried to work up a drunk, but it was no good. The atmosphere of the club was too gloomy. “Let’s go,” I said to Scar. “I’ve got a pretty nice bottle of tequila somebody gave me.”

We climbed to the top of the bunker. No one else was out yet. We settled into our lawn chairs; I passed the bottle to Scar and thought about looking into Zen.

“I know what Kiêu is,” said Scar. “I see the way she looks at you.” He drank from the bottle and passed it back.

I looked at him helplessly.

“I don’t care,” he said. “I love her and she loves me. We can work it out.”

I’d had no idea Scar was such a romantic. I stayed on top of the bunker long after everyone else had gone to bed, shivering and trying to drink myself stupid over the hopeless, needless deaths of Ginny the newbie and Lam Van Hoc. I stayed there until after moonset, practicing my switchblade and staring off across the smelly little swamp where we tossed our beer cans. I listened to the outgoing artillery and watched long rivers of red tracer rounds pouring into Núi Bà Đen, the breast-shaped mountain twenty miles away. Close by, I heard a dog yip. I’d heard somewhere that more dogs were being taken home from ’Nam than wives. I didn’t know what that meant, but I did know that Scar and Kiêu were in for a rough time, back in the world.

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Virginia Kirsch, a real person and a Donut Dollie, was murdered at Cù Chi on August 16, 1970. See <http://www.war-stories.com/donut-dollie-diary-ii.htm>

For definitions of terms used in this story, see <http://www.and-holmes.com/song-glossary.html>

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