

# The Working Girls go By

*I. Van Laningham*

*“...Brother Billy's got both guns drawn,  
He ain't been right since Viet Nam.”  
—Play it All Night Long, Warren Zevon*

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*Tuesday 17 March, 1970*

Her name was Tuyen, which means angel.

She was a working girl at the Sunset Grill, a run-down bar in a run-down country in a run-down war, but it was a bar that gave us the illusion of love and the hope of home. She was breathtakingly lovely, and she lived in a country that smelled like burning shit.

If you stood in just the right place on top of Núi Lớn, Big Mountain, where 369th Signal Battalion HQ was, you could look down on the South China Sea and on Bãi Sau, Back Beach. You could see the long row of bars on Back Beach run by Vietnamese civilians. At the South end of that row, with a porch extending from the front and around the side, was the bar that we called the Sunset Grill. I don't think any of us ever knew what the Vietnamese called it, and we didn't much care. All we knew was that it promised escape from the heat that covered the country like a thick flannel blanket, relief from the Army bullshit and a place away from the war that we could call our own. We went to drink and get drunk and watch the working girls go by. In the afternoons, you could see the girls, walking or riding bikes; in their áo-dài's they looked like flocks of birds making their way through the tree-lined streets of French Colonial Cape St. Jacques. You could have mistaken them for schoolgirls, except that schoolgirls only wore white, and the working girls wore every color there was. Everywhere you looked in Vũng Tàu you saw the ghosts and shadows of an imperial architecture, except on Back Beach where the buildings were made of stucco and tin and salvaged wood, furnished in mismatched castoff, with walls papered in centerfolds.

I'm Andi—Andrea—Holmes; in 1970, I was the battalion clerk for the 369th, on top of Big Mountain, and I was a WAC Spec 4. I wasn't interested in the working girls, or so I told myself. I told myself a lot, in those days. I was 23, the daughter of missionaries, patriotic and embarrassingly close to being a virgin. I grew up in Indonesia, the Philippines and Ecuador before my parents returned to Chicago, where my brothers enlisted. Where I enlisted after Dana died.

Two months incountry had ruined my mouth; after a year and a couple of months in the Army, I swore and drank as well as all the other GIs. My mother would have been appalled to hear me; she would have washed out my mouth with soap, just the way she had when I was little and told her what I really thought of the dolls she kept trying to make me play with.

In some sense, I was always on duty; like all the women serving in Việt Nam; it was our unspoken, but mandatory, duty to keep up the troops' morale. The troops being defined as only men, of course. Our morale was irrelevant. We were support personnel, modern-day camp followers who weren't supposed to know that sex existed; we were there to remind the men of what they were fighting for. Once in a while, guys would make passes at me, and I would put them on shit-burning duty. So you see, it wasn't Việt Nam's fault that it smelled that way, but the US Government regulations which mandated waste disposal by cremation.

During the day, I would tell myself oh, yeah, I really wanted a husband, once I got out of the Army. Someday I would get to go back to a country where I wasn't surrounded by 10,000 unwashed GIs stepping on their tongues every time they saw a round-eye like me. Those days were hard; I worked 0600 to 1800 Monday through Saturday, and I was expected to be Little Miss Perky every minute of those twelve-hour days.

Every night, I went down to the Sunset Grill to drink myself stupid, and, when I was being honest with myself, watch the working girls. They weren't called working girls in those days, but bar girls, hookers and whores.

The nights were easier, down at the Sunset Grill. Sometimes, when the Hueys went whupping by and the sound competed with *Inna-gadda-da-vida* playing on the finest stereo equipment ever liberated from Uncle Sam's Quartermaster Corps, you could hear the flat, thick *whoomph!* of artillery going out. Incoming was usually rocket fire and mortars. What you never really heard was the sound of the South China Sea on the beach, the sounds of gulls squabbling over things you didn't want to look at closely, or the sounds of the constant wind and constant surf. Mostly what you did hear was the music that pulled in the GIs, giving the bar girls in their áo-dais a target and covering up the sounds that shouldn't have been heard, like the girls screwing in the tin-walled back rooms. Sometimes they put on an act to convince the guys they were earning their money. And the music covered up the sounds of GIs throwing up off the side porch while girls the size of twelve-year-olds went through their wallets.

Ky Thi Tuyen was one of those twelve-year-old-size girls. Everyone called her Kitty. She said she was eighteen, but she just said that to make the guys less nervous. If she had been seventeen, I would have been surprised, although she seemed more mature than many of the men. You grow up fast in a war zone. We used to talk when she had a few minutes at night between customers, more on slow nights. You have to understand, my Vietnamese at the time was horrible. I'd just begun to learn, and I was as likely to ask someone if they'd had sex with a water buffalo as had a nice day. Kitty's English wasn't

any better than my Vietnamese, but we made ourselves understood. And I guess that's what counted.

When I went through Basic Training, enlisted women got lectures on snakes and what to do about bites; the men got training films about sex. Keep it in your pants was the message. But if you couldn't, go see the medics and get your condom ration. Prevent deadly disease, of which, they were told, there was no shortage. Some of the guys passed on what they were told to some of us girls.

I remembered the disease part. It kept me pure. It was easy for me to not sleep with men. I wasn't interested, for one thing. For another, I'm six-foot-one and carry a switchblade. I scared most guys. I liked that, although once in a while, I worried about being too tough. But what it came down to was protecting myself; I'd heard too many stories from the Donut Dollies and the nurses and the women running the service clubs to think it was a simple matter of calling for help or just saying no.

Sure, I got called a lesbian by the guys, but never to my face. They would, and did, say the same about any woman who didn't sleep with guys. Naturally, any woman who did was called a whore.

I didn't sleep with the girls, but I knew I wanted to. Kitty knew it too. She'd come into the bar, dressed in that electric blue áo-dài, and see me standing at the bar chasing cheap whiskey with cheaper Vietnamese beer, cigarette dangling from the side of my mouth. She'd sit on the stool next to me, and say in that rich voice of hers that always made me think of Bacall, “You wanna fuck, GI?”

No, I'd say in my lousy Vietnamese. Shouldn't she be at home asleep? Taking care of her husband? Not if she wanted to live, not if she ever wanted to see the end of the war, she'd say. And she had no use for a husband. “Boring!” she'd say, and I'd sneak peeks at her figure. She'd pretend not to notice, but, like a cat, she'd arrange herself for better viewing. I thought then, and still think now, Vietnamese women were the most beautiful on earth. Kitty the prettiest of all.

I remember that hot March night; Tuesday, St. Patrick's day, 1970. Like scalding wax from a candle, it left permanent scars. I was early at the bar, like I always was; I hardly ever bothered with the mess hall. There was an air base in Vũng Tàu, and air bases were where the food came incountry. The Army got supplies after the Air Force, but between the cargo planes and our mess hall kilotonnes of supplies slipped into the black market like horse through the needle in a junkie's arm. I got better food eating at the bar. It was cheaper and tasted fine, as long as you never asked what the meat was. Early on, I found out that I'd been eating pig-ears, so I quit asking. You could see the weevils in the bread, too, but as long as they didn't wiggle you ate them anyway. It was good bread, though, a direct descendent of the French baguette. I kept on eating pig-ear sandwiches.

That night, I stopped at the bar first thing, of course. I said “Chào anh”—hello, older brother—to Tan, the bartender.

“Chào em,” he said. Hello, little sister. “How are you tonight?” Sometimes I thought his English was better than mine. Tan was always dressed flawlessly, shaved and manicured impeccably. I envied him. White shirts and pressed grey slacks in 100° heat? And there I was, by contrast, the tall skinny blonde girl in rumpled jungle fatigues and messy jungle boots. I ordered food and asked him to send it out on the porch with Kitty when she was free. He poured my shot of cheap whiskey, handed me my Ba Mười Ba, and gave me that small opaque smile. He knew what I liked to drink. I think he knew, too, what I thought about doing, in my heart of hearts. But I never felt judged by him, and I certainly did by most of the GIs.

I took my drinks and went outside; it was early enough in the evening that I was the only one on the porch. I grabbed the table furthest toward the back; later on, of course, the whole porch would be crammed with smelly GIs. By that time, I'd either be parked on the beach or out behind the building with a bottle or part of one. I put my beer on the table, but leaned up against the railing so I could watch the ocean. I wished for palm trees, but those were over on Bãi Truoc, Front Beach. Back Beach had no trees at all. They would have blocked the view anyway.

When Kitty came out with my food, she brought me another double and a Sài Gòn Tea for herself. She put the plate down and leaned beside me on the railing. We didn't say anything for a while. I was conscious of her body, close, and her scent, fresh and clean. I was nervous. All the guys were scared of me, but stand me next to a woman a foot shorter than I was and I started melting like butter in a frying pan.

Most nights, she teased me. Not that night. I guessed she didn't have a customer, but maybe that was too harsh. When you're the only one bringing any money home to your family, you do what you have to do. A few times before, Kitty had snuggled up to me without teasing. Never when anyone else was looking. And those other times, she had invited me home with her.

“You come home with me GI,” she would say. “I show you good time.”

And I'd shake my head, deeply afraid.

She'd say, “For you free, GI.”

I couldn't tell if she was serious and I was so scared I could hardly move. That night, it was different. She said the same things, yeah, but when she asked me to come home with her, she had her arm around my waist. And when she told me it was free for me, her lips were a millimetre from mine and I could feel her breath, sweet and soft and fragrant, like cinnamon. No one was watching us, so I moved that last millimetre and kissed her. I closed my eyes and tasted her lipstick and felt her tongue exploring my mouth; her small hand found its way around my neck, tangled in my hair. I was breathing hard and so was she. I put my hand on her back and pulled her to me; I could feel the texture of her áo-dài under my hand.

I was as aroused as I was afraid; I don't think she was afraid at all. I felt her hand slip under my fatigue shirt and I didn't stop her. I felt her hand on my skin and I didn't stop her; I pushed into her hand and didn't stop myself. Nothing existed for me except her hand and her mouth and the delicate touch of her fingers. The sound of the music inside faded away in the pounding of blood in my ears. She stopped kissing me, moved her lips close to my ear, whispered, "You come home with me now. I take off work. You share betel nut with me, Andi."

I wanted to. Oh, I wanted to. Every time I saw her in the bar, or on the porch, she gave me that smile full of promise, full of hot sweaty nights and twisted covers, of hours spent touching each other in secret moist ways that I could only imagine. I wanted the real thing. But. "I'm not ready yet, Kitty."

She stopped touching me. "It's OK, GI," she said. "Some other time." She kissed me on the cheek. "We got beaucoup time."

She went back inside; I was trembling. I wanted to call to her but my mouth wouldn't open. Kitty came out again a minute later, with another shot for me. "You want bottle?" She asked, smiling when she saw I was busy licking her lipstick off my lips.

I shook my head. "Maybe some other time," I said.

She grinned. "You save plenty time for me, GI." She patted my hand. "When you ready." She went back to the bar.

I sat at the table, ate my sandwich and smelled the ocean. I thought about Tuyen and the feel of her hands on my skin. I'd never done anything like that before, never confronted the need inside me quite so openly. I thought, if she had pushed me a little more, I'd have gone with her. And I found that knowledge discomfoting; to know that I would have risked getting caught outside the compound after curfew, or being found with a woman when it meant, at the least, an undesirable discharge, told me something about myself I hadn't known before.

And here I thought I was so practiced at being such a good little girl. No, I didn't do perky very well, but by golly my mom taught me how to behave, how to be charming and polite even when you hated someone's guts. She also taught me that serving others' needs came before anything I wanted. I leaned back in my chair, put my feet up on the table and watched moonrise across the South China Sea. Back home in Chicago, all the beers would have been green. All I had inside me was sadness, loneliness and homesickness. I *felt* ten thousand miles from home for the first time since arriving in Việt Nam.

Someone had put on a tape of Simon & Garfunkel albums and cranked the volume. Guys were filtering out onto the porch. I sighed. I drank my shot, gathered up the plate and beer and went inside, leaving the ocean to watch itself. I was able to squeeze through the crowd and shove up against the bar. All I wanted was my booze and to see Kitty, but she

was busy in the back, fucking for money so she could keep her family alive. Every time I thought about what she was doing, it hurt. I had another drink.

Sometimes, she got lucky and the jerk she was with would pass out, leaving her to take money out of his wallet. She'd tuck it in her pocket and come out to stand next to me at the bar, flashing that grin at me and telling me where she kept it. "Hey, GI, you want take away?" That night, I thought she might get lucky like that, and I would maybe get to spend some more time with her. But when she came back to the bar, our latest FNG came sidling up to her right away, like a garden slug oozing up to a crocus. I knew who he was; I was the battalion clerk, after all, and I hadn't liked him any better when he'd reported to the CO last week. He'd found out where the action was quick enough. You could tell he hadn't taken a shower. I could see Kitty's eyes cross and the expression of revulsion on that perfect face, framed in that shiny black hair that went down to her waist, whenever he turned away. She was mugging for me, and it made me laugh. But he had the money and the time and no inhibitions, so when he said, "Let's go" to her, she did.

That left me there at the bar next to Phil Cherry, who suited his last name well. A medic, he was a little guy, not much taller than the bar girls. He was blonde, wore thick-lensed glasses, and might have been the most innocent boy I had ever known. I'd seen him turn amazing shades of red when Kitty had suggested a little boom-boom to him.

"Hey, Cherry," I said. "I need a ride tonight."

"Don't you always? And don't I always give you one?"

"Yah, but I like to ask. You might have a hot date."

He snorted.

Phil was about the only Army I talked to. He'd never had a hot date. Sometimes, I think he suspected. I guessed that was OK, because I kind of suspected him, too. He never said, and neither did I. Since we didn't talk about it, you couldn't say we were close. Probably, his mother, like mine, told him when he was growing up, "Go out there and make friends!" Easy for a mother to say. Not so easy for those of us on the fringe to do.

After an hour I got worried. Kitty was too efficient to take that long. Usually, she came back to the bar within less than a half hour, snuggled up to me to get my juices, and my jealousy, going. Jealousy that I couldn't admit. To silence that voice inside, I had another drink, and another, and another. That night, after too many another drinks, I wondered where she was. I tried ignoring my anxiety, but when the jerk she'd taken to her room turned up at the bar again, I slipped into the rear where the tiny little rooms were and knocked on her door. No answer, and she wasn't inside, but I saw the side door standing open, the breeze off the ocean making it sway on its hinges. There's *always* a breeze in Vũng Tàu.

During the day, it was often over a hundred Fahrenheit. Places like Cù Chi, it got to 110° every day, monsoon or not. In beautiful downtown Vĩng Tàu, 120 klicks from Sài Gòn, we enjoyed a moderate climate. Sometimes it only reached the high nineties. At night, always, the temperature dropped into the seventies. For the Vietnamese, and for people like me whose thermostat had been permanently reset by days that debilitate most foreigners, the nights were *cold*. I was shivering just a few minutes after I slipped out the door and started following her tracks. I could tell which ones were Kitty's; besides being on top of everyone else's, I could see the little sweeps made by the trousers of her áo-dài in the sand. So I knew two things; one, she hadn't been naked, and two, she hadn't been dragged. I worried anyway.

I was almost a klick down the beach where it turned rocky, close to VC Hill and away from any buildings, when I saw the lump on the sand. The moon was a little past first quarter, swelling toward fullness, giving me enough light to see. Seaweed had washed up on the sand near Kitty's body. I could smell the rank odor of the weed as I chased the crabs away. My knees gave out and I knelt beside her. She lay on her back, her arms away from her body, eyes wide, fear on her face, and a clean red slice right across her neck. The blood on the blue áo-dài had only just started to dry. I felt nearly sober, despite the number of drinks I'd had.

All I could think was, why hadn't I gone home with her? If I had, she would have been alive and in my arms, not lifeless on the beach. We would both have been happy, at least for a while, if I hadn't been so scared. I was crying: "Oh, Kitty, I'm so sorry." When Dana had been killed during Tet, two years before, I hadn't been nearly as devastated. Which made me feel even worse. She was just a little hooker, out for money and the presents she could sweet-talk the GIs out of, and Dana was my brother. But it didn't make any difference. Kitty had class and style and to me, at least, was a lot more than *just* anything. I felt it was as much my blood on the sand as Kitty's.

I bent over and sank my head on my knees and sobbed until I was exhausted, until there was nothing left inside me but ice-cold rage. Whoever killed her left two corpses on the beach that night; Ky Thi Tuyen and the little girl who had been Andrea Holmes. And I'd helped him do it.

When I was empty, I sat up and examined her body. Whoever cut her knew what he was doing. He was right-handed; the right side of the wound on her neck was a tiny bit more ragged than on the left, so it had to be the exit side. And whatever he'd used was deadly sharp. I kept my switchblade as sharp as I could; I never knew when I'd need it. But I could tell that the edge that had cut Kitty's throat made mine look like knapped flint. He'd done her from the front and she fell back on the sand, dead in seconds, blood spurting out to splash on the blue cloth and drain out on the beach. It could have been a straight razor. Or it could have been a scalpel, but I wasn't sure that would have had the depth of cut for that kind of work.

I knelt there in the sand, watching the sea creep up the beach, smelling the dead fish on the breeze. I kept brushing the crabs away. What the hell could I do? Calling the MPs

was out. Why should they have cared? What was another dead bar girl to them? Not their jurisdiction. I didn't want to spend hours in a jeep or a scruffy guard shack, being interviewed and hassled for making trouble.

I couldn't call the White Mice. The ARVN MPs with their shiny white helmets would look at me and take my switchblade and call me a murderer. Even if they didn't arrest me themselves, they'd tell the MPs up the hill I'd killed her, and that would almost certainly get all the beaches, not just Back and Front, shut down for several days. All that would accomplish would be to piss off everyone I knew and a lot of people I didn't. There was enough of that going around already; I didn't need to add to it, especially if it became known I'd found the body and couldn't keep my mouth shut.

I planted my butt on the sand and crossed my arms on my knees. With the moon the way it was, I could see there was nobody out but me. I lit a cigarette and pulled the smoke into my lungs. I wished for a hip flask. I sat there on the sand, still warm from the heat soaked up during the day, next to the body of a woman I had loved, and I watched the ocean move.

When I finished the cigarette, I field-stripped it and shoved the filter in my pocket. Only then did I realize I was crying again, had been crying for a while. I looked down at Kitty's body, dug in my boot and pulled out my switchblade. I used it to slice off a short length of her hair which I put in my wallet, tucked behind my ID card. I looked down at her one more time.

Some people think the body is a cocoon for the soul; despite my parents' best efforts, I couldn't believe that. Still, I couldn't stop myself from bending over and kissing those cold red lips, my tears dripping on her face. I smoothed her hair and started to stand up. That was when I noticed that the little ivory and gold Buddha was gone from around her neck. I spent too much time looking for it. I found instead another set of footsteps in the sand. They weren't jungle boots, but civilian shoes, boy shoes. Not like the sandals Kitty wore. A Vietnamese had cut her throat.

I'd get nowhere following the tracks, more than likely, but I had to try. I refused to look back.

They led me almost to the bars, then angled to hit the street before I could tell which one the killer had been heading for. About what I'd expected. I went back to the Sunset and ordered another shot and a Ba Muồi Ba from Tan.

“Where you been, Andi?”

“Out.”

He stood there looking at me, his neat little mustache twitching. Finally, he shrugged and poured me the shot of rye whiskey, let me alone.

I turned my back to the bar so I could look out at the little tables; the men with drinks of various kinds and the girls with their Sàigòn Tea. I looked at the working girls, trying to remember which one Kitty had been closest to. It was hard to concentrate: adrenaline and rage. One of the men got up and left, leaving his drink on the table, heading out the front door. Hue, left sitting at the table, looked sad. Yeah, she was the one I'd seen walking arm-in-arm with Kitty. I looked around for Phil. He was at another table, alone. I knew him well enough to know that he had already turned down several girls who had tried to get him to buy them drinks.

I walked up to him. "Come with me, Cherry."

He started to refuse, but when he saw my face, he picked up his drink and followed me over to Hue's table. She was just starting to get up.

I put some MPC on the table. "Get us all some drinks, Hue." I looked at her. "For you too."

She looked surprised, but said nothing. She knew what Phil and I both liked to drink. When she came back, she sat down with us. I leaned forward.

"Kitty's dead," I said in a low voice. "Someone killed her on the beach."

Hue just looked at me for a minute, trying to figure out the angle.

"Tuyen su chết"—Angel is dead—, I said, forgetting most of my Vietnamese.

She peered at me and realized I wasn't joking or working a scam. "Who you tell, GI?"

"No one. You tell." I looked back at her. "You tell police?"

She looked at me scornfully and shook her head. "Only family," she said. "Where on beach?"

I told her, as best I could. She nodded. "Yes. I know where." She stood. "You want drink?"

I nodded. "Bring bottle," I said, handing her some monopoly money. She went behind the bar and talked to Tan, who glanced at us for a second. When Hue came back, she brought the bottle with her. She placed it on the table. I looked at Phil, who was pale. It was beginning to sink in: no more Kitty. I poured us both doubles and knocked mine back quickly, feeling the whiskey spreading hot throughout my body. Almost like the first drink of the day.

"What did you say to Tan?" I asked Hue.

“I tell him Tuyen dead. He say he send friends to get her.” She looked up at me, frustrated. “I not know how to say it. Real good friends. Number one friends.”

“Trusted friends?”

“Yes! Trust! Like you.”

I shook my head. Nobody trusted me.

“You wait here.” And she was gone before I could say anything. I wondered about Tuyen's family. I'd known that she was the only girl. There was an older brother, but she had only said of him, “He away.” Well, that probably meant he was VC, so I had stopped asking. I knew she took care of her parents with what she made at the bar, I knew she lived close to them, and I knew she lived close to the Grill.

I felt a hand on my arm. It was Phil, concern in his eyes. “Hey. You OK?” That was the first time he'd ever touched me.

I shook my head and felt tears. “No. And I won't be.” I brushed his hand off.

He looked hurt. I sighed. “Oh, Phil, I'm sorry. It's...” I couldn't talk anymore; I crammed my fist in my mouth.

He put his hand back on my arm. “You won't believe me,” he said. “But I really do understand.” He patted my hand.

Hue came back and sat down with us. She turned to me and said, “You find out.”

“What?”

“You find out who kill Tuyen. I pay you.” Hue held out a twenty, a real honest-to-goodness greenback from the US of A.

She tried to shove it in my hands, but I dodged. “Tôi không lấy!” I won't take it! That thing was worth a small fortune. A twenty would get you a hundred-twenty to a hundred-fifty dollars in MPC on the black market. That represented something like two or three months income for the average family in South Việt Nam. I looked at Phil for help, but he was keeping his mouth shut and refusing to look at me.

I'd had enough. I grabbed the bill and took out my lighter, held it to the edge. Hue looked furious.

“GI dinky-dau,” she said. “Beaucoup dinky-dau.” Thanks. I already knew I was nuts.

I handed the bill back to her. “Hue beaucoup dinky-dau,” I said, lighting a cigarette.

She took the bill with a scowl. “You no find?”

I opened my mouth and what I said was, “I find out.” Hue tried to shove the greenback in my pocket. “You no pay,” I said. “For you, free.” I felt hollow saying it, but that was what came out. “I talk to Tuyen's má,” I added. Maybe her mother would know something.

“*Ngày mai*,” Hue said. OK, I could wait till tomorrow.

The three of us sat at the table, drinking. Even Hue poured whiskey into her tea. I guess it was our wake.

We reached the end of the bottle and I was only marginally closer to being drunk than I'd been when I had found Tuyen. Tan placed a new bottle on the table for us, already open. I felt his hand grip my shoulder gently, reassuringly. I looked up at him; our eyes met. He gave me a slight nod; I wondered what would happen to her body now. I assumed she would be cremated, being Buddhist, but I had no idea how long it would be before that happened. I poured another round for all of us. We didn't waste time; curfew was coming up, and I wanted to blot out all I'd seen and experienced.

It didn't work. Phil and Hue got drunk; I remember both of them crying, while I sat there feeling nothing, knocking back shot after shot. Phil got so plotzed I had to drive; Hue went to sleep at the table. Tan told me he would keep her safe. I always rode shotgun with Phil, so it was a change to pour him into the passenger's seat and follow the switchbacks up the hill. We were the last ones, caught behind a dead slow deuce-and-a-half going “wocketa-wocketa-wocketa” the way diesels do. When we finally got to the gate, the guards waved us in; one peered at Phil and grinned at me. “Hi, Andi. Didn't know you could drive.” One of the disadvantages of being a round-eye; everyone knows your name, even when you don't know theirs.

I got Phil back to his hooch, and went to use one of the outdoor showers. I still felt wide awake, cold sober and angry as the devil.

The showers were 50-gallon drums of water, up on stilts to heat up in the sun. After nightfall, they cooled off. By midnight, they were distinctly unwelcoming. I soaped and rinsed as fast as I could move. Even in the shower, I kept my knife with me. I remembered what it had been like, learning how to fight with a knife when I was growing up in Indonesia, wandering the streets of Jakarta. The other American kids had quit calling me queer in a hurry, but I never forgot what they said and how it made me feel.

*Wednesday 18 March, 1970*

The next day, I hardly had a hangover when I went to work, doing my best to win the war, typing dispatches and duty rosters and fighting off the nastiest excuse for a top kick on the planet. Those guys I put on shit patrol? They got to burn the shit they dealt with; I had to ignore the turd on two legs I had to work with and take orders from every day. I

had to smile prettily at it and pretend it was human. That day, the First Sergeant was in fine form, touching me every time I got near him. I gritted my teeth and took it, of course. He was tall and handsome, in a Charlton Heston sort of way, but he was still lifer scum. I think he thought some night he was going to rape me, and I would just keep my mouth shut, either because of his rank or because I would swoon with satisfaction.

But I'd been watching him. He might be taller than I was, but he didn't really know where his edges were. He wasn't exactly clumsy, but there was a lot of slop in his movements. American cars steer like that; they get where they're going, but there's a good deal of play between the wheel and the wheels. They don't go where you point them, only in the general direction. I figured he could make life unpleasant for me, but during the day I was a good little soldier, and at night? Well, he might hurt me but I could hurt him worse, I was certain of that. And I was never without my knife.

When the CO and the First Sergeant both went out to lunch at the same time, leaving me alone in the office, I locked the door behind them and broke down. How could I find who killed Tuyen when I thought I had?

In the afternoon, I did the minimum I could, my nerves and skin raw, my eyes trapped in sandpaper sockets. I had to stay till 1800; the CO and top kick usually left at 1700, sometimes earlier, giving me at least an hour to myself in the evening. I usually took the time to do filing. I got my stack of personnel folders and started shoving them roughly into place. I was half-crazy, edgy and I needed a drink. I tried to think about Tuyen, and what had been done to her, without tearing up, but that was no good. Then I tried not thinking about her, and that wasn't any better. I'd been smoking all day, but it didn't help much. I remembered the First Sergeant kept a bottle in one of his desk drawers.

If the bottle was nearly full but still open, I could get one or two shots without him noticing. I got a paper cone from the water cooler, went behind his grey metal desk and got out the scotch. I hate the stuff; it tastes the way I imagine turpentine tasting. I poured a healthy double into the paper cone and put the bottle down. It was expensive booze, and, not for the first time, I wondered how he could afford the stuff. Me, I'd almost rather drink shaving lotion.

Cherry and I had done that once; we'd been out late one night, staggering back just before curfew. He invited me to his hooch for a drink, but it was near the end of the month and he was out. So was I. We'd been falling-down, desperately, insanely drunk. We had dug around in his room and all we could find was a bottle of Aqua-Velva. We drank it. That stuff comes out of your pores for days and days; people near you keep sniffing, funny expressions on their faces. Never again, I'd vowed, but I knew just as well as Phil that the next time we were out of booze there were no guarantees.

I swallowed the scotch without noticing how horrible it tasted, crumpled the cup and stowed it in my pocket. I opened the drawer again to hide the bottle. In the bottom of the drawer was a clutter of papers and miscellaneous junk; I slid the bottle in, and noticed there was a film of white powder on some of the papers. I rubbed some of the powder

between my fingers. I knew it wasn't plaster or drywall dust; I doubted if there were much of either one on any military base in 'nam. I sat and thought a minute, then got an envelope out of my desk and scraped some of the powder into it. I re-arranged the bottle and the papers carefully, trying to make it look as if no one had been in there.

Time to go. I locked the door and pocketed the keys, went to track down Phil.

He was ready to leave, so I didn't even bother to go back to my hooch. I climbed into his jeep. As we pulled up to the gate, I saw the First Sergeant go around the first curve ahead, alone in his own jeep. I leaned forward.

On impulse, I said, "Let's find out where he goes, Phil."

"Man, I dunno," said Phil. "It's kind of like spying on your parents, isn't it? You know they fuck, 'cause they had you, but it's repulsive."

"More like picking a scab," I said. "Let's do it."

We followed him to the shops next to the airbase PX, which closed at 1800, where he went into the small Vietnamese barbershop. Phil wanted to leave and head for the Grill, but I said I needed a haircut anyway.

There were only two chairs and two barbers inside, so I told Phil to go first. Top was getting shaved; I sat across from him, waiting my turn. He grinned and watched me. My skin crawled. I watched the barber, right-handed, shave him, that long sharp straight razor gliding sensuously across his throat. I thought how much I would like it if the blade cut the sergeant the way Tuyen had been cut.

Maybe I was supposed to be horrified at having thoughts like that. I looked hard and deep inside, and found no uncertainty.

I noticed that the barber was looking at me, not at what he was doing. He grinned at me and winked when the blade slid across the sergeant's adam's apple. In the next chair, Phil was nearly through with his haircut. The barber finished the top kick's shave, patted him dry with a towel. The First Sergeant paid the barber, said something I didn't quite make out. The barber nodded, said he would be there. After the sergeant left, I got into the chair. "No clippers; only scissors," I told the barber, using signs. Incountry, I'd discovered that beauty shops were hard to find, barbershops everywhere. I could persuade the barbers to leave more hair on me than they left on the guys, and most of the time they did a good enough job.

"I remember you," he said. "No sweat." He went to work. "Nice hair. Pretty color."

I got tired of that sometimes, but since there are no blonde Vietnamese, I put up with it. Phil added a head massage, and my barber was fast, so we finished together. I asked Phil

if he'd heard what the First Sergeant had said. "All I heard was something to do with yellow—I couldn't hear the last word. But it's a place."

"Yellow Bird?" asked Phil. "That's one of the town bars."

While we were talking, the barbers closed up shop. Both of them got on mopeds and took off. My barber headed out the airbase gate and into town. We watched him drive off. I pulled the envelope out of my pocket. "Hey, medic. Can you tell me what this is?" I asked him.

Phil opened it, found the powder, felt and smelled it. He looked up at me. "Heroin. Where'd you get it?"

"The First Sergeant's drawer, where he keeps that high-class scotch." We looked at each other.

"Now we know where Top gets the money for such expensive stuff," he said.

I nodded. "Let's go to the Yellow Bird," I said. "We can go to the Grill later."

It wasn't too dark; the moon was up again. The barber's moped was parked in front. We drove on by, then turned around and drove by again. One of the jeeps on the street was from the 369th.

"Let's go in," I said.

"What the hell for?"

"C'mon, Phil. You can't go to just one bar all the time."

"Yes I can." But he got out of the jeep with me.

I knew how he felt. But at the same time, I thought nearly every night of going over to Front Beach and trying the Violet Flower. What the other GIs called "that queer bar." Once or twice I'd come close to actually doing it, but felt so faint I hadn't been able to.

The Yellow Bird was an ugly bar. Slapped together, a patchwork of whatever was available, nothing matched. Half the roof was tile, the other half tin. Inside, even the shot glasses and beer mugs were all dissimilar. The walls were covered in *Penthouse* girlie shots; you could tell who the place was catering to. It had more tables and less bar real estate than the Sunset. Here and there, I could see officers mixed in with the upper ranks of enlisted men. Neither Top nor the barber were anywhere we could see.

While waiting for either one to show up, I occupied myself with watching the girls and looking at the centerfolds on the walls. I wondered how the bargirls felt, seeing those icons of overblown round-eyed beauty on the wall; comparing themselves, they must have felt inadequate. Even round-eyes felt that way, I could have told them.

We hung around about an hour; Top didn't show in that time, but the barber did. He grinned and waved at us, talked to the bartender a moment, then went off with a pretty girl in a short green dress. The bartender gave us another round each, and we didn't see the barber again. I figured he must have felt pretty flush, to buy drinks for strangers. We

got rid of the evidence and left; Hue had told me to show up by 2100 when she would bring Tuyen's mother to talk to us.

It was a slow night at the Sunset Grill. Phil and I were able to get a table on the porch; we sat there, quiet, watching the ocean and waiting for Hue to arrive. I'd told Tan to send her out when she showed up. We had time for one more round before she arrived with a tiny woman, who might have been forty, might have been sixty.

"*Chào ba,*" I said. Hello, Mrs. "*Xin lỗi,*" I started. I'm sorry. The woman started to cry. I turned to Hue for help, but her eyes were full too. So were mine, but I needed to know what she knew, and I was never going to get it this way. I went inside, shoved my way to the bar and grabbed Tan.

"I need you, Tan. On the porch."

Without hesitation, he stopped pouring the drink he was working on and called over one of the other bar girls who was just cruising. He spoke to her rapidly, too quickly for me to catch anything, and followed me outside. By this time, Mrs. Ky had sunk to the floor; Hue was sitting next to her. Tan sat in the chair next to Phil and lit a small dark cigarette in a holder; I hadn't seen him smoke before.

He sat, still and quiet, waiting. I guess his patience infected us all, because after a minute, the woman started talking to him. Again, I couldn't catch anything. Finally, Tan turned to me and said, "She wants to know if you're the one whom Tuyen wanted to bring home."

Unable to speak at first, I nodded. I took a deep breath and held it for a second. "Tell her I'm sorry to meet her like this," I said. "But can she tell me anything that Tuyen said yesterday? Anything that might help."

He spoke to her. They conversed for a minute or two. "She was very excited before she went to work yesterday," he translated. "She was going to meet someone."

"Did she give any names?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Tuyen wouldn't tell." More conversation, which went on a while; he turned back to me. "She thinks the person she was going to meet was a barber. And that it had something to do with drugs." He looked at me. "Drugs for GIs." He shrugged.

"We don't care what you Americans do to yourselves," he said, blowing a smoke ring. "But if we can make some money off of it, well ..."

I nodded. Mrs. Ky was looking up at me from the floor. Wilted, I thought, was the best word to describe her. I made a decision. "Tan, I want her address; I need to be able to write to her." I dug in my wallet and found a couple of twenties in MPC. I handed them to her. "Tell her I'll send this much every month."

“You're serious.”

“Dead serious,” I said. If I didn't send it to her, I would just drink it up and piss it away.

He talked with Mrs. Ky and made notes on a piece of paper, which he handed to me.

“I know it's not much,” I said. “But it's something.”

“It could make all the difference,” he said. Mrs. Ky was bowing; I bowed back. She started to leave, but stopped to say something else to Tan before going on.

“She said, watch out,” Tan said. “The barber works with somebody on *Núi Lón*, that's how he gets the stuff in.”

We watched her walk off. Tan stubbed out his cigarette in one of the ubiquitous aluminum pot-pie tins, pocketed the holder, and stood up. “I think she gave you good advice, little sister.” He walked to the door, but turned back. “If you learn their names, tell me.”

“Sure,” I said, although I wasn't certain I meant it.

*Thursday 19 March, 1970*

The next night, Phil and I went to the Yellow Bird to start our drinking there. It felt, if anything, even uglier than it had yesterday. I struck up a conversation—if you could call it that—with the pretty bargirl in the green mini-dress. Ever since Chris Noel had been incountry, mini-dresses had been popular with the working girls. I had heard that on Tu-Do street in Sài Gòn, you could go for days without seeing an *aó-dai*. I thought that was a shame, since *aó-dais* were so flattering. I was glad that the girls at the Sunset Grill were relatively traditional.

While talking to the girl, whose name was Mai, I noticed she had a thin gold chain around her neck. Even though it was a mini-dress, it didn't show cleavage, so what the chain held was hidden. What the hell, I thought. “What's on your chain?” I asked, pointing.

She grinned, and pulled out Tuyen's Buddha. I almost snatched it from around her neck. Instead, I asked, “Where did you get that?”

Her face changed. Mine must have shown how I felt; she said nothing and walked away. Phil and I almost left then, but we decided to hang around. I thought the barber might show up, but Top came in the door a few minutes later. I turned away, studying some of the other customers, all the way from a captain down to a PFC who smelled like he'd been on shit patrol all week. He probably had. Maybe I'd put him there.

Mai was talking to the top kick. He glanced our way, giving me and Phil a scowl. I looked at some of the pictures behind the bar while trying to pretend I wasn't. "Time to go, I think," I said to Phil.

As we were getting into the jeep, he asked, "What's the hurry?"

I told him. "The only reason Mai would have run right to him and told him we were asking about the Buddha was if she got it from him—or from someone he's tight with."

"Well, do you think he killed Kitty?"

I shook my head. "Naw. He's not the kind to get his hands dirty." I paused. "Or bloody."

"I dunno. You don't get to be First Sergeant without knowing how to shovel shit." He looked over at me. "Or hide the bodies."

I shrugged. "Well, he didn't hide this one."

"Didn't need to, did he?" He looked sour.

I didn't answer. We were parked across the street from the bar, under a tree that shielded us both from the streetlight and from the moon, now nearly full. On the side street next to the Yellow Bird, two figures were arguing. One was the top kick; I was pretty sure the other was our barber friend. I looked around, checking the layout of the streets. Yeah, I could do this. I shoved my dog tags into my pocket.

"You stay here," I said to Phil, and got out of the jeep. He started to say something but I was gone before I could hear what it was. I shrugged. The one who doesn't listen wins, I thought. Although I wasn't sure what winning meant in this situation. I ducked through the cars and across the street. There was an alley behind the bar which could be reached by going to the other end of the block. If I hurried, I could get close enough to hear what our friends were saying.

I made it; Top was pissed, and wasn't holding his voice down. "Why the hell did you give this to that little whore?" he said, dangling the Buddha and chain in his hand. "You stupid gook."

Our barber took offense. "You call me gook one more time and I no get you anymore stuff," he said. "You fuck off. I get someone else."

Top backed down. "Yeah, OK, sorry. But it wasn't very smart."

The barber snorted. "No sweat, GI. You give it back, I get rid of it."

"No, I'll get rid of it." Top stuffed it into his pocket and handed over an envelope.

“Here. You got it?”

The barber nodded, took it, passed back a plastic bag. “No more names.”

“Yeah, yeah. I'll watch it.”

I decided to go; I didn't want to get caught listening. I ran quietly back up the alley; coming up to the main street again, I was met by Phil in the jeep.

“I told you to stay there,” I said.

“Sue me,” he said. “I got nervous and thought I'd try to make it easier for you.”

“Hmmpf.” I looked up the street. Top was messing with the spare tire cover before he climbed into the jeep. “Keep your lights off,” I said. “Maybe he won't see us.”

But of course Top pulled the jeep around and drove right by us. I could see him glaring at me as he passed. So much for undercover work. I sighed. “Let's go get drunk,” I said.

I needed a good drunk; I wanted to get lost in the Grill and the booze and the noise. But it wasn't the same anymore. The music seemed quieter, the heat more oppressive; there was no one I wanted to flirt with. I got a bottle from Tan, drank more, and faster, but couldn't seem to get to that place where Việt Nam and the Army went away. The Sunset Grill had changed, and so had the bar girls. Hue tried to cheer me up, but gave up and went off with one of the men.

Sometime after 2200, my eyes were filled with tears and I was filled with desolation and anger. “I hate this place,” I said. “I hate what happened, I hate the war and most of all I hate the men who run it and profit from it.”

Phil nodded. “You and me both,” he said. He wasn't having trouble getting drunk. He waved to Tan to bring him a bottle. The small bartender came over and looked at me.

“Andi, you OK?” He nodded at the bottle I still had.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” I said. He couldn't have helped but notice the tears.

Someone shoved his way to the bar, displacing the PFC next to me, who got up and left his stool. The shover snapped at Tan. “Scotch. Double.” He talked too loudly. Tan moved slowly. “Hurry up, gook!” Tan moved more slowly.

The drink disappeared down the top kick's throat. I wished it were battery acid. “Another. And *move*, this time.” I tried to wipe my eyes. He had seen me in the jeep, and that must have been too many times in too few days to make him comfortable. Tan turned to pick up the scotch again, and Top said to me, in a low voice, “Missing your little gook pussy, bitch?”

I didn't remember pulling the knife out of my boot, but I must have, because there it was at his throat. He jumped back, bumping the GI behind him, his eyes wide. There was dead silence in the bar. On the reel-to-reel, the Animals were singing *I Gotta Get Out of This Place*, but my attention was focused on the First Sergeant.

"Give me an excuse," I whispered, the tears still running down my face.

"Andi," Tan's quiet voice cut through the music. He gently touched my hand, pushed it away from the sergeant's throat. "He's not worth it."

"I can get the CO to court-martial you," the sergeant said, rubbing his throat and eyeing the knife. "I got witnesses."

"I don't believe you do," said Tan quietly. The sergeant looked around the room; everyone had turned away.

"You could try court-martialing me, but could you afford to lose all that income from your drug sales?" I asked. "I may not have any proof, but I sure can make a stink. The CO may be under your thumb, but I'll go higher if I have to." I wondered if the CO were in on it. "You'd have to get a new supplier, at least. And someplace new to hide the stuff."

The First Sergeant gave me a malevolent glare and walked out the door. "Put the knife away, Andi," said Tan.

I did, and stood there thinking until Tan poured me a shot of Early Times. Good stuff. Not the rotgut I had in the bottle I'd paid for earlier. I slid some MPC over the bar to him and he pushed it back, waiting. I threw the shot into the back of my throat, put the empty glass back on the counter and pushed it back toward him.

"Was he the one?" he asked. He refilled my glass.

Finally I nodded. I told him what I'd seen, about the Buddha and the barber. He already knew what Mrs. Ky had said; we figured Tuyen had arranged to meet with the barber and had asked for a cut to keep quiet. It was the only thing that made sense. He had killed her, given Mai the Buddha, and she had known that the barber and Top were doing business together. When I'd asked her where she got the necklace, she had told Top.

The few dollars that Tuyen had asked for wouldn't have meant much to the barber, but either he or the top kick hadn't wanted to share. Both of them were getting rich off the REMFs on the hill; Tuyen was dead, the Sunset Grill was an empty-souled place, and I didn't much care who had done the actual cutting. I wanted them both dead. I regretted not slitting Top's throat right there.

"I don't know the barber's name," I said. "But he's the shorter one of the two in that shop."

"It's enough," he said, leaving the Early Times bottle on the bar and putting the half-empty one of rotgut under the counter. "I know who he is."

I looked at him. "I could be lying," I said. "Or I could be wrong."

"No."

I waited. He shrugged. "You're trying to learn our language," he said. "You don't treat us like animals. You're trying to help Tuyen's family and you didn't have to tell us about her; we would have found her sooner or later." He looked at me. "I think we can trust you about as much as we can trust any foreign devil." He gave me that small smile. It wasn't much. I poured myself another shot and held it up. "What do I do now?" I asked. "Should I take it to the CO? Tell the MPs?"

He turned away and got out another Vietnamese beer for me. He placed it on the counter in front of me, popped the tab and threw it away. "Do nothing," he said. "Nothing."

"But. ..."

He poured me another shot. "Andi," he said gently. "They will be taken care of." He carefully moved the Early Times bottle nearer to my hand. "Both of them."

I looked into his face, the face of Victor Charlie. The VC. The enemy. Offering a chance of justice. A small hope, but more than I would get from the Army or the ARVN's. All it would cost me was keeping my mouth shut. And a little piece of my soul. Cheap at the price, I thought. Something worthless for a little less evil in the world? No contest.

The Animals were still screaming, a different song, but I knew they had told me the truth earlier. Justice might be on the way, but it could be tomorrow or it could be six months. Damn few men ever know how close women are to violence, but the First Sergeant had gotten a hint that night. It was time to think about getting out of Vũng Tàu. "Let me know what happens," I said to Tan. "If I'm not here, tell Phil. He'll have my address, no matter where I am."

He nodded. "I will let you or Cherry know. No one else," he said.

I'd settle for that. I started serious work on the bottle. I only remember a few more things that night. The heat inside. Trying to dance with Hue, although I'm an awful dancer. Sitting on the bar next to Cherry, singing *Countin' Geckos on the Wall* in harmony. Someone trying to teach me and Phil some god-awful song which I refused to remember. Then blankness. Phil must have got me back somehow, because next morning I woke up in my hooch, my clothes still on.

*Friday 20 March, 1970*

I didn't bother to shower before I went to work. I had a new-enough haircut, anyway, even though I had that familiar run-over-by-a-chicken-truck feeling which lasted most of the day. I was able to spend the morning not thinking about work; it was just the usual stuff, cutting orders, filling out requisitions properly and so on. The First Sergeant was in and out; the CO stayed in his office. Normally, I left for lunch; sometimes I ate, but most times I headed back to my hooch to read. That day, when the CO left at noon and said he wouldn't be back, I took the opportunity to make a few phone calls. I typed up some forms and a set of orders for myself. I left them undated and slid them into my top drawer. Just for kicks, I checked Top's drawer. There was Tuyen's Buddha necklace and the package of heroin I'd seen him get from the barber last night.

I thought about checking the jeep, but there was no need. I knew what I'd find. A hole or a flap cut in the spare, big enough to shove a bag through. I thought it was over-cautious of Top, since no one would ever search his jeep. It also meant plenty of room; he could probably stuff ten or a dozen packets inside that tire.

The First Sergeant didn't make it back till nearly three. Stinking of alcohol, he slumped at his desk.

"I have a suggestion," I said. I began cleaning my nails with my knife.

He didn't try to act like he didn't know what I meant. "What?"

I opened my desk drawer and took out the request for transfer and handed it to him. He read it quickly.

"You don't want money?"

"All I want is away from you." And to see him die the way Tuyen had.

He stood up. "Maybe that's not all I want from you."

My knife was in my hand, open. "I think it better be."

"I'll see you in LBJ."

I shook my head. "No. If I'm in LBJ, you'll be dead." I shrugged. "Maybe it'll be worth it." I was full of adrenaline and scared spitless. "I could find out and let you know." I gave him a grin, pulling up the smiles my mother taught me to use when you loathed someone but had to be polite.

For a second there, I thought he was going to try something. Instead, he signed the form. "Here," he said, shoving the papers across the desk.

“Thanks.” I put the form with the orders. “You might want to mention to the CO that it would please you if he just signed these.”

He glared and left. I watched him go, knowing it was better this way, but my hands still trembled as I folded my knife. Since I had his signature, I made one more phone call to a place called Cù Chi, taking care of the last details. Then I dug Tuyen's Buddha out of the booze drawer and hung it around my neck. Top would see it was gone in the morning. I thought about flushing the heroin, but that might have pushed him over the edge.

I was through with the Sunset Grill, so that night, I went to the Violet Flower. I couldn't get Phil to go with me; he stayed in his hooch with a bottle and drank by himself while I borrowed his jeep. It wasn't like I thought it would be, not at all. I watched the working girls; none of them were Tuyen. Everyone let me alone but the bartender. I couldn't get drunk, but I tried.

*Saturday 21 March, 1970*

Next morning, I saw the CO immediately. “Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked. He looked tired. “Cù Chi isn't nearly as nice as Vĩng Tàu.” He looked down at my records. “I might be able to arrange a promotion if you stay.”

I smiled at him, very sweetly. “Why, sir, that would be very nice. But it sounds like I'm needed in Cù Chi; I'd really like to go. Sir.”

He signed; I was on a Huey to Tân Sơn Nhất airport, near Sài Gòn, before noon. I was picked up by a Spec 4 named Ritchie, who told me that Sgt. Hutch was delighted to have a real clerk, finally. Hutch had sounded happy when I'd talked to him yesterday afternoon. Ritchie kept stealing glances at me on the ride back; I didn't care. I don't think I smiled my first two weeks there. I spent most of those nights crying myself to sleep. I was grateful there were no other women in the 369th Detachment; if there had been, I would have had to share my room.

*Later in 1970*

One day Hutch sent me off to Long Binh Company HQ, with Ritchie as driver, to carry in dispatches, orders, requisitions and forms. We were supposed to go with just one weapon, an M16, because women weren't allowed guns in a combat zone. I complained to Hutch. “C'mon, sarge. You expect Ritchie to protect *me*? You're kidding.” I was a head taller than Ritchie; I had muscles, not pudge.

Hutch looked at me, his eyes wide as usual, giving him a slightly pop-eyed stare. He'd been watching me practice with the knife; once in a while, he'd try. He shook his head. “No, I don't. But I can't issue you a weapon.” He shrugged. “If Ritchie wants to sign out two, though, I can't stop him.” That was the way Hutch was; there was always a way.

I grabbed Ritchie and went to the weapons rack. I saw something on the wall and reached for it. "What's this?" I asked him.

"A blooper. An M79 grenade launcher," said Ritchie. "There's the ammo." He pointed. Little shells the size of chicken eggs; in regular explosive, white phosphorus and fragmentation varieties.

That's when I smiled; I think I made poor Ritchie nervous.

The whole district of Củ Chi was strictly off limits to all US armed forces personnel, so I spent my days doing what little real work I had to do and practicing my Vietnamese with mama-san and papa-san. Mama-san's seven-year-old daughter was named Hue; she was a charming little thing, one small joy in my world. When I got to know mama-san better, and my Vietnamese was better, I asked her about betel nut.

"It turns your teeth black if you chew it too much," she said. "But everyone puts it out for the guests at weddings."

I nodded. "What if someone says they want to chew it with you?" I asked.

She looked at me uncomfortably. "If two people share it, they are married, or brother and sister, or they are lovers. It is a sign of loyalty."

I spent my evenings and nights on top of the bunker watching the war, trying to stop thinking about Tuyen, or inside Ilikai East, the EM club next door, doing the same thing. But I could never stop thinking about her and what might have happened if I had gone home with her that night. I couldn't get over the feeling that if I had, she would still have been alive.

After a while, I quit going anywhere except to the PX to pick up my cigarette and whiskey rations, and to buy stuff to trade for whiskey. I went on the dispatch runs, taking what had become *my* blooper, but I wouldn't even walk around the chain-link fence to Ilikai. Hutch only made me work 0800 to 1700 weekdays; all the rest of the time was mine. I worked on my tan, drank, practiced the knife, drank, slept, drank, did my job, drank, counted the days, and drank. Sometimes I ate, usually C-rations. I sent money to Tuyen's mother and painted my room black.

Later, Vietnamization came to Củ Chi. Ilikai closed, along with the other EM clubs, pizza joints, restaurants, even the barber shops. An extended Vietnamese family moved into the Ilikai building, giving me more people to practice Vietnamese with. We started to tear down the 369th Detachment. The plan was to send back everything of value and leave the hooch and the chain-link fence for the ARVNs. Even the toilets went, luckily not till I was very short. I did the packing lists, and I guess Hutch liked the job I did, because he wangled me the promotion I might have had if I'd stayed in Vũng Tàu.

I heard from Cherry. It was just a short note, to say he was on his way home and by the way, the First Sergeant had died visiting a whorehouse in Sàigòn a few weeks before. He didn't know any details, but Tan had thought I'd want to know. He said look him up in the states, but didn't give an address. I felt a small, warm glow inside. Or maybe it was the whiskey. I never heard about the barber, but I knew.

*Still later, 1971*

The next time I heard anything, I was back in the world myself, and it was a different story. On the Freedom Bird, I'd met another Spec 5, Bob Tucker, also headed for Chicago. He was big and sweet and gentle; I couldn't begin to scare him. I had to admit I liked that. I got the idea that he could save me. He loved me; I liked him well enough; we got married. He didn't even try to get me to change my name. A month after that, he was sent to Ft. Lewis, Washington, while I went to Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey. It would be at least a year before we could both be in Chicago.

In the meantime, there were plenty of bars with plenty of girls near Ft. Monmouth, where I tried to think about Bob when I was drinking. I wasn't good at it; I found myself watching the working girls, thinking about Tuyen and the Sunset Grill and about what I had taken away from 'nam. Mama-san had my address; I had her promise to write and this vast raw wound inside me. Nice girls didn't fall in love with other girls. Did they? I knew they didn't let their sweethearts die.

One evening, late, I overheard a couple of Signal REMFs talking about Vŭng Tàu. “I heard that asshole got fragged,” one said. “The top kick from hell,” said the other. Top kick *in* hell, I hoped.

I wanted cheap rotgut whiskey and a Ba Mùoi Ba; all I had was Early Times and Bud. I wondered where I could find betel nut in Jersey.

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

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