

Tom Doherty

From *Father War*

Thunder caroming through the hills could not wake me, or rain drum-rolling over the long canvas roof, but when a storm erupted in my gut I came jolting upright, blinking into a gamy darkness alive with snores and deep, wet coughing. I clawed open the mosquito net, pulled on boots, web gear, poncho, and steel pot, and I fumbled outside into the same downpour that soaked enemy soldiers in the hills. Last night in the mess tent a guy said the NVA had broken in on our artillery frequency boasting that they were going to overrun us. I hadn't got my bearings yet and I tried to read the faces around me, but they told me nothing. Mouths were stuffed, jaws worked, eyelids remained at half-mast. Didn't they care? Don't they talk about these things?

I bumped against the surrounding wall of sandbags and stumbled into the grassy lane between rows of tents. Ahead, a crescent of pumpkin colored light leaked from under the flap of the mess tent. I concentrated on it so hard that the piss stump snuck up and tripped me into the grass on all fours. Unwitnessed, thank God.

I poked my head into the smell of coffee and bacon. "Hey Sarge, where's the crapper?"

He looked up from his mug and cigarette. His hat was the whitest thing I'd seen since stepping from the plane at Tan Son Nhut two weeks earlier. "Down the road. Follow your nose."

Three steps later I crashed into a water trailer. No time to catch my breath. Eight or ten yards further along I was up to my ankles in mud. The rut headed south. He was right. I was getting close. My waving hand caught a rope. I followed it to the latrine.

This was all new to me. I was a new second lieutenant assigned to army intelligence in Saigon. My job was to transport a sealed pouch from here to there, nothing more. It suited my temperament back then. You land, look around -- tanks, bulldozers, road graders -- locate a headquarters tent or a bunker somewhere, and before your ears pop and voices begin to make sense, you are off again. They had sent me up here with a list of names and profiles.

Something big was expected. Familiar figures had disappeared from their usual haunts, possibly back into the field, possibly even way back out here in the highlands. Rooms in the old French school that served as brigade headquarters were littered with snaking bundles of cable from generators outside. Gritty, pistol-packing infantry officers with farmer tans pointed at maps while others on folding chairs scribbled in little notebooks. Day and night, 105s around the perimeter sent shells chugging into the hills. It was all new to me.

Inside I unharnessed my web gear, wrapped the straps around my pistol, tucked the bundle into the helmet, dropped my pants and sat with a gasp on the wooden seat. I suppose I moaned and whimpered some, sounds of gratitude and relief. I had made it. Nothing else mattered. Let them drop in their mortar rounds. Let them come sneaking through the wire.

I ran a hand over my face. I wondered if I should have shaved last night or if I'd have time this morning, if I could fill my steel pot from the water trailer or if that was just for the cooks. I'd have to see how others handled it. Have to brush my teeth, change my socks.

That's when I realized I wasn't alone.

I heard pants being pulled up and cinched. He'd probably snuck up here for a little privacy. Probably I had ruined it for him.

A sling rattled against a rifle stock, and the flap came open on the opposite side, facing the hills. "Have a good one," I said. I expected the clomp of heavy boots on duckboard, but he seemed to glide away with barely a whisper. Gym shoes, maybe. Or sandals. The smell of perfumed tobacco hung in the air, the sweet, clinging scent of Saigon street corners and sidewalk cafes.

Later that morning I sat against a tree where the helicopters came and went, waiting for a lift. I hadn't told anyone. What could I say? It all seemed like a dream back then.

Everywhere, this sense of a storm about to break. A few days later, on an island hilltop crowned with giant orange antennas, the security sergeant took me up into a guard tower chilled by breezes off the South China Sea. Soldiers extended their enlistments to stay at a place like this. A solitary, air-cooled shift spent gazing at banks of radio relay equipment at the base of the antennas, then horseshoes, volleyball, an evening swim, a movie under the stars. It was the kind of duty they didn't want anyone else to know about.

Up in the tower at twilight you could almost convince yourself that Nha Trang and Cam Ranh were glitzy resort towns, so festive and mellow was the glow they sent across the water. But even with his machine guns and grenade launchers and concertina wire laced with trip flares, this Texan had grown leery of the fishing boats in the darkening waters below and of whatever might come drifting out from the black hills of the mainland to the north. Even here, the good life was turning sour.

And at Vung Tau on the coast of the South China Sea an MP lieutenant was worn down from a succession of night alerts which always petered out at first light into a headachy obsession that he had left some essential task undone. In the red dust of Long Binh the army rushed to complete a prefabricated city in which to gather the various headquarters outfits still scattered around Saigon. Tanks roamed the perimeter. Airborne battalions hopscotched from field to field to keep the enemy off balance. Helicopters patrolled the road to Saigon.

Sometimes at night I woke chilled by the ceiling fan, and I ran a hand over my ribs thinking how easy it would be. The tropical openness of our suburban billets made it a snap; silently over the wall, up the stairs, a flimsy lock to pick. He could be lurking in the corner right now, biding his time.

But in the light of day I felt remarkably level-headed. My feet were on the ground. Increasingly, a scheme of things was falling into place. Officially I was an intelligence analyst, but doors remained closed to me. No one asked my opinion. They kept sending me off cuffed to a briefcase full of envelopes stamped silly with big red warnings. Even so, certain documents passed my desk. I had a feel for some of what the lifers upstairs were brooding over, but more importantly I was gradually able to penetrate the misleading surfaces of the swarming city on my own.

Others in our office let the garbage and ingratitude sour them on the Vietnamese but not me. No white man could expect to settle back and enjoy the passing scene. You had to keep moving or the city would devour you. One morning I prowled a rabbit warren of little shops lit by pillars of sunlight through the glass roof. I was considering silks to send my mother -- the girl kept piling new colors on the counter -- when I heard eerie voices all around: "You! You! You!..." A crush of children with old worried faces had pinned me to the counter, their soiled palms waving under my nose.

So while the other guys confined their travels to the bars and steam baths along Tudo

Street or joined the mob gathering at the Cholon PX, waiting for the next shipment of Pentax Spotomatics to hit the shelves, I hired a cyclo and investigated the city. Behind me, a scrawny, cat-whiskered mercenary in sun glasses mounted on a sputtering wreck of a motorcycle; ahead, all of Saigon.

To the docks, where on the grassy bank old Chinamen in pajamas went through a leisurely simulation of calisthenics while on a warship behind them ranks of Korean sailors bellowed and stomped through the real thing. To the central market, where baskets of squawking animals were passed from battered Dodge buses to gaggles of waiting peasants. A woman went by in a pedicab with a pig sprawled across her lap.

To the shady European grid of washed and perfumed boulevards and gilded facades which dissolved on all sides into courtyards dense with laundry and yammering women, and into narrow streets where my eyes burned from the reek of urine, charcoal smoke, fermenting waste. Then out into a Mother Goose neighborhood of silly, forward tilting buildings and swallow-boned people in pajamas. Bright little pools of produce and polished utensils spilled onto the walks from open-front shops. Nets of gun blue flies hovered over puddles in the street. The cyclo bumped and snaked through a swarm of skinny people on skinny bicycles. Yellow dogs watched us pass. Children ran along side, extending their hands and pleading, “You! You! You!...”

At dusk I climbed to the roof of my BOQ and read *Street Without Joy*, *The Quicksand War*, and a book by French anthropologists from the 1930s. When the light was gone I’d gaze at the litter of beer cans and up-ended lawn chairs left behind by sun worshippers, a *Stars and Stripes* blown open to this headline: MISS CALIFORNIA HAS FIRST LOVE -- CHILDREN. Flares drifted down on the other side of the river. Indian country. The sky was crowded from the changing of the guard, the daylight types circling to land, night fighters taking their place. A flash of neon from an invisible gunship, and on the ground, a cloud of bright splinters.

Some nights I stayed up until dawn with my new Panasonic, searching for news and trying to make sense of all these bits and pieces of information: “BBC Southeast Asia now ceases transmission on this frequency. The East Africa transmission...” “They said Nazareth was a lousy town, a looked down upon dirty town. They said nothing good would ever come out of that town....”

For a while the experts upstairs concluded that there were three battalions of VC in

the Gia Dinh suburbs and maybe five in the city. Later they upped the tally to five and seven, and some thought that was low -- maybe seven and twelve, or seven and fifteen. No one knew how many there were, not in Saigon or Cholon, or out in the new suburbs around Tan Son Nhut. All we really knew was that new faces were pouring in, and familiar ones were disappearing. I had seen a letter sent to one old timer by his wife. Does he still smoke so much? Does he walk in the early morning or in the evening, when the air is clean, to keep fit? Does he avoid the Chinese cafes of Cholon, where the government spies gather and the food is unclean...?

She was right about the spies, for all the good they did us. Our people had him pegged for a long-service regular sent in from the field. Probably his health was shot -- malaria or gut problems or festering wounds. The people upstairs thought he commanded some kind of cell-in-waiting. Not only did he catch hell from his wife but probably from the nervy young irregulars as well. Old main force types like him spent years on ice while irregulars from popular army units got blown away ambushing convoys, attacking police stations, and car-bombing our officers' billets. He was one of the bugs that would come flooding out of the cracks when the gong was sounded. Which could be any time. Incoming traffic had increased sharply: sampans full of small arms, flower trucks heavy with rockets, explosives, mortar shells.

Sitting up there watching and listening and analyzing was an old familiar pleasure, but it was not enough anymore. You feel that you've spent your life waiting for certain conditions to be met, and then you realize that you have already moved beyond them, and the accelerating series of revelations becomes a burden.

It was as though I had been counting down to this very moment.

Curfew. All's quiet, the streets deserted except for barefoot men forking steaming garbage onto a lantern-lit truck bed. A jeep pulled up beside the guard post outside the senior officers' BOQ across the street. One MP remained with the machine gun while the other delivered coffee to a man in the shadows.

What if I adopted our old main force regular as my personal target, my contribution to the war effort? Why not? I had memorized the number of his cab. Once in the central market I had seen him squatting beside his cab under a billboard of a blond woman with a dazzling smile that she owed to Captain Toothpaste. The air was thick with the usual noise and dust

and sickly blue haze from many small engines in need of tune-ups. He filtered the urban toxins through a rag held to his face, just as his wife had insisted in her letter. Waiting seemed to have become a way of life for him too.

The guard must have pointed me out to the MP because he looked up grinning. “Bad dreams?” he said.

I hadn’t expected conversation. None of your business, I thought, but what I said was, “I’ll let you know.”

By now I had a couple months seniority, and I arranged for our newest lieutenant to be assigned the up-country runs. I took the Saigon area exclusively, and within days it paid off.

On a run to USARV headquarters at Tan Son Nhut airbase I broke with routine. Instead of leaving through the front gate I directed Mr. Dinh back past rows of mint green barracks, the tent city for new arrivals, and a sort of industrial park of massed generators and radar balls, and out the American back door, so to speak, into a grubby wasteland marked by relics of an earlier war -- abandoned guard towers and the skeletons of junked airplanes. At intervals along the dirt road, women peddled beer and Coke to our guys rumbling through on garbage runs. The trucks disappeared into a smoky haze that hung over the smoldering dump, then came roaring out empty. Behind them, scavengers waded through the slop in search of treasure -- cans, torn fatigues, packing materials.

Far enough removed from the dump to escape the pall of smoke was a grassy field that stood above the marsh like a poor man’s tropical island but with a sunbleached, upended WWII prop job in place of a palm tree. We knew from the Vietnamese Special Police Branch that the field had recently become home to a handful of street kids. Beggars, peddlers, and shoeshine hustlers, they had migrated from the riverfront, but why? What were they doing way out here, far from their clientele on Tудо and Cong Ly streets?

I didn’t have to wait long for an answer. It was as though once I’d decided on a course of action, life sped up, and the gears and pulleys at work under the humdrum surfaces were revealed to me. We came out of this poisoned wilderness onto Plantation Road and a boomtown crossroads where men lounged in dim cafes under a profusion of calendars, smoking cigarettes and gazing expressionlessly into the traffic, which at this hour was mostly

army green plus a sprinkling of blue and yellow taxicabs. So many taxis in fact that on this major artery any particular little blue and yellow Renault would be lost in the flood. He could be driving any one of them.

I had seen him first at the central market where peasants and produce from the countryside showed up every morning. And now it was clear to me that he also had easy access to the wastelands near the big airbase, where the street toughs we didn't know much about had recently taken up residence.

I told Mr. Dinh to pull over, got out, and sent him on his way. On foot I back-tracked past the graves of French nuns and the crumbling sandbag bunker that had once stood guard over the field. I had a map case hitched over my shoulder. It was weighed down with my ancient service automatic and two full magazines.

Twenty minutes later I was kneeling behind my binoculars up in the rusted wreck of a guard tower that still reeked of urine. This was not like me. I'm not one to go out of my way to tempt fate. If Vietnamese police came circling below, or our own Air Police with bullhorns and shotguns, I was likely to end up a humiliated ex-lieutenant. But then my lenses picked up the distant figures on the island of yellow grass. I counted five. One pitched stones at the tail of the old upended fighter plane. Two squatted over a game they were playing in the dirt, and two others appeared to be sleeping.

I eased back on my haunches and settled in. Eventually the trash trucks stopped coming. Whole families materialized beside the roadside vendors, knocking down the lean-tos and carting them off on foot, every old lady and barefoot kid carting a board, a chair, or a bucket of tepid bottles. They trooped westward away from the drifting smoke of the dump to the crossroads beyond.

Sunlight flashed off a pair of spectacles moving against the foot traffic. A bony little fellow picked his way between the homebound families and into the hanging wafer of haze. He climbed through it to the high grassy lip of the island, then down into the shadows where the street kids waited.

A few minutes later the spectacles flashed back into view. Five heads came bobbing up and over the sunlit fringe of tall grass, following the old man down the trail to the crossroads.

Dusk was coming fast. I started down the ladder, and back on the ground I withdrew the pistol from my map case, inserted a magazine, and jacked a round into the chamber.

Surprisingly I felt kind of silly. Here I was, finally taking action, advancing toward possible revelation, maybe even danger, after waiting a lifetime for an opportunity just like this, yet if anyone was looking on they'd probably be smirking. Hey, check out the boy commando! Weapon in hand I approached their camp.

There were no surprises. They had all cleared out. For sleeping quarters there were shipping cartons -- Kelvinator and Speed Queen -- with newspapers and rags for bedding. Otherwise there wasn't much to see. Pop bottles, a few bald tires, and the usual cloud of flies. Nothing of much interest, except, on second glance, a design scratched into the dirt. Inside a large rectangle, smaller rectangles were arrayed in a way I found strangely familiar. They were not symmetrically placed as on a game board but they weren't random either. It was like a blue print. A floor plan.

I had seen that pattern in the dirt many times, but from a different perspective -- sitting by the open door of a Huey climbing from Ton Son Nhut, off on yet another courier run. From a bird's eye view the rectangles were rooftops, corrugated steel on the outlying buildings, red tile on the ornate mansion in the middle. I was looking at the layout of one of the U.S. installations in the Ton Son Nhut neighborhood, a tidy, walled-in villa amid the grimy suburban sprawl. No doubt the army had leased that place, as it had the intelligence center where I worked, from a dragon lady or a Cholon millionaire. It could have housed the army's signal headquarters or the logistics command or some other rear area nerve center. It was twenty seconds by helicopter from where I stood; maybe twenty minutes by taxi. I couldn't pull out now if I wanted to.

Back in my room I took a shower and stretched out on the bed, trying to think of a way to get my distracted superiors to grasp the significance of my discovery. They'd be dismissive. I was grandstanding, out of my depth, chasing after brownie points. Somehow I'd have to break through all that. Gradually I became aware of a melancholy hum coming from the ceiling fan. No, not the fan. It was the windows again, and that could only mean another ammo dump was going up somewhere, the explosions too distant to be heard but powerful enough to shiver window panes miles away. Probably they had infiltrated Bien Hoa or Long Binh again.

Next morning at the bus stop the usual country voices traded bits of lifer chit-chat

in the dark. Such was the fraternity of senior NCOs. After sun-up those sounds were a normal part of army life, but in the pre-dawn darkness they were too loud and took too much for granted. They complained about the windows, couldn't sleep, damn our little slant-eyed friends anyway. Cigarettes were lit and there was much coughing and spitting into the dust rolling off the gravel road. At this hour only military vehicles were on the move, mostly Vietnamese litter jeeps barreling in from the countryside. A column of army trucks filled with Vietnamese soldiers headed in the other direction.

At breakfast the major to my right shrugged off the excitement as just another random flare-up in the boonies, no big deal. He was a finance officer, for Christ sake. What could he know? Everyone had an opinion but nobody knew a thing. All this time I was alone with my own discovery. Ammo dumps going up, Vietnamese casualties pouring into town. Who would listen to this lieutenant's story about a sketch in the dirt?

A ripe-smelling gang in white armbands was manhandling desks down the stairwell. Not a good sign. A work crew from the Long Binh stockade was a big deal. I could hardly squeeze up the steps to the section chief's office. Padlocked file cabinets were lined up by his door. The room was stripped bare. My supervisor was a young captain famous for his surfer tan. I saw him in the crush by the window. The officers were watching the morning formation in the quadrangle below. Caught up in the festive mood, Vietnamese typists and maids chattered at the adjacent window.

Voices came from the yard. Morning formation: "Operations all present... Plans and Programs all present... Personnel all present..." They would be squinting away from the unwelcome sun creeping over the wall, aware by now of all the watching faces.

First Sergeant Rojo spoke: "Listen up, gentleman, for I have news for thee."

A great moan went up. They knew. The dreaded day had come. Good-bye to the flesh pots of Saigon. Hello, Long Binh.

I looked for Major Francis, the installation commandant, but he was nose to nose with an officer from Plans and Programs, arguing about which section was responsible for transporting radio equipment. A two-and-a-half-ton truck chugged through the gate, tinted red from the dust of Long Binh. From the columns of black smoke above the wall, it was apparent that more like it were lined up, waiting to pull in.

I couldn't find anyone to talk to. The top brass had already embarked for the new

installation. Our California captain bounded from room to room clutching a clipboard, driven by the deadlines on his mimeographed schedule. Major Francis meanwhile had been cornered by a pretty little typist who shrieked at him. "You no say nahthing, you jus' go way, you take our wuk! Me madda, me fadda, me babysan..."

Soon the turn-around drive where the general's pennant once hung was filled with desks and file cabinets and packing crates. Trucks were lined in looping formation from the gate to the mansion, waiting to be loaded. Those of us with enough rank to avoid manual labor but not enough to be trusted with anything important were herded back onto our buses. We had an hour to pack up our personal gear.

So once again we were sealed in a barely oozing river of taxis and snout-nosed buses festooned with bicycles and baskets and white-knuckled hangers-on. Only a bright swarm of Japanese motor scooters managed to fight through the current like salmon plunging upstream. Stalled Vietnamese army trucks were heaped with women and kids and pots and mattresses. We were held up by an intersecting convoy of army fuel trucks, and when I turned to my side window I met a country face all cheekbone, sweat and road grit, that stared back with the frankest, coldest brown eyes ever. Several faces in fact, all hanging from the rear of the bus next to our own and all staring at me.

In our bus, heads nodded in unison. They had napped on the way to work; they were napping on the way back to our billets. They would wait this out. The decisive battle could be shaping up around us, but they cared only about a surprise sprung on the enlisted men and about who goes first and who carries what. I had news, damn it. Lives could be saved. It was as though the army was reminding me again how far outside the flow of significant events I was, sealed in a bus going nowhere.

In my room I pulled uniforms from the closet and tossed them on the bed. I peeled open my duffel and stuffed in boots and khakis. I hated to pack, hated the training camp terror of not being fast enough -- the old dread of falling behind. Even more I hated myself for doing this at all. I did it because I had been told to do it. Because everyone else was doing it. Because that was my undeviating habit in life -- to do what was expected while secretly biding my time. In a kind of frenzy I jammed in mosquito netting and tent stakes, my stiff new combat harness, and then I stopped cold. I sat on the bed to think this through. Voices echoed through the halls pleading for help with stereo systems and ceramic

elephants.

I took my map case from the closet, hitched it over my shoulder and went down the back stairway.

Our buses were crowded up onto the sidewalk, idling. I slid between them, and he was waiting for me, a scarecrow grinning around a perfumed cigarette. I climbed aboard and pointed the direction. "Tan Son Nhut," I said, and he gunned the engine and nodded eagerly, as if he already knew where I was headed.

He was very good. He had an instinct for congestion in the making. Where gridlock was congealing around a man face down on Cong Ly, spilled from a truck or a bus, he sputtered onto the sidewalk. He sped down terraces and dodged the slops tossed from second stories, dodged half naked children picking through mounds of trash, dodged the bleating trucks and buses. Out of the heart of the city he sped through one smoky, stunted crossroads community after another until, approaching the airbase, we entered a plume of red dust thrown up by another intersecting convoy, empty flatbeds mostly, all labeled ORIENT EXPRESS, some trailing shrouded artillery pieces and carrying soldiers in flak jackets who breathed through bandanas, many of them sleeping among a litter of sandbags and timbers and busted crates. Was this a routine run or the exhausted remnants of a hasty re-supply mission?

Once again traffic crushed in around us but my man had a fury about being cornered, and he bullied his way to the side of the road and down a lane, racing parallel to the convoy. Pastel buildings blurred by, and between them flickered a slab-sided brute chained to the bed of an enormous truck. It was a disabled personnel carrier, the treads blown apart, the body scorched, gashed and apparently punctured. Pedestrians turned away and brought rags to their faces as it went by. We overtook another flatbed stacked with brand new latrine sheds. Finally the lead jeep carrying two military policemen fell behind us. They cursed out my driver as he looped across the road in front of them. Back on the road to Tan Son Nhut we fell in behind a vehicle built like the Good Humor trucks of my youth except that it was green and printed on the cold storage door were the words, MORTUARY -- DO NOT DELAY.

It turned into Tan Son Nhut airbase and my driver started to follow but I waved him on down the road through another nondescript boomtown neighborhood of cinderblock, tin and scrap wood. The big city press of machines and tempers was behind us. This could have been Appalachia. There were chickens about and hanging laundry but not a human being in

sight. My driver stopped at the side of the road. As we consulted my tourist map he suddenly got nervous and did a quick one-eighty back to the big road, Plantation Road they called it, and went on more cautiously for another mile or so. Then he pulled over and stopped beside an empty café. He flapped his hand, pointing into the distance and talking fast. I understood. From here on I was on my own.

I handed him a wad of piastres, and he was gone.

Nearly three o'clock. I imagined my office mates packed solid in our buses, walled in by duffel bags and shipping cartons. Soon they would be setting up their stereos in brand new quarters in Long Binh.

The silence was eerie. If anyone was around, they'd ducked out of sight.

I clutched the map case under my arm and set off jogging down the lane. I was a lousy shot with a pistol, but even so the weight of my service automatic was comforting.

The usual woebegone pups came sniffing around. A potbellied toddler watched me pass from an open doorway. I saw hands reach out and close the shutters of a second story window. A drumming sound was overtaking me from behind, and I turned just in time to see a dirty gray wall of rain rush over me. In a second the sour haze was washed away. I was soaked and chilled clean through.

I was looking for the white walls topped with concertina wire that I had seen from the air, but I went right by them until the gate caught my eye -- a familiar, dinged-up slab of black-painted iron -- and I stopped. The sandbagged guard post was empty.

I knocked, waited, then gave a shove. The gate creaked partway open. Out of the rain came the crump, crump of explosions and the woodpecker tap of distant machine gun fire. They were hitting Tan Son Nhut, I suspected, but then they were always going after Tan Son Nhut. I missed my radio. The military police net would be swarming, likewise the control towers. By now even BBC might be shedding light on whether this was routine harassment or the long expected uprising.

I walked in. When we flew over the compound by helicopter I'd seen heat waves rising from the two huge engines in the generator shed, but the cement floor was empty now except for oil stains where the engines had been. On either side of the gate, in the corners of the wall, mounds of sandbags sprawled where guard towers had stood.

I continued along the gravel drive past the mess hall and poles for the volleyball net.

Beyond a break in the concertina wire on the east side was the vacant motor pool. From the air I'd seen Vietnamese drivers snoozing in the back seats of jeeps parked there. I'd seen men in jungle fatigues crisscrossing the grounds carrying folders from one white building to another. The neighborhood kids might be impressed by this enterprise, the armed guards and wire, the trucks and buses coming and going, and at night, the otherworldly moat of light encircling the place. But anyone who saw it from the air knew what it was -- another administrative headquarters. A paperwork factory, just like the one I had come from.

Too timid to tap a busy captain on the shoulder and insist that he listen to my story, I was rash enough to plunge into no man's land and raise the alarm myself. Thus did I find myself in sole possession of an abandoned headquarters compound. In the battle of accelerating schedules -- their big push against Saigon versus our big move to Long Binh -- I was an obvious loser. It was probably what I deserved.

I was mounting the steps to the front porch when it occurred to me that I had not closed the gate. It hung open where I had left it, and that was my first real scare, which was silly because there was no security here at all anymore. They could come over the walls or through the motor pool. They could do any damn thing they wanted. Still, an open gate was like an invitation, and I was in no mood for visitors. I started back up the driveway thinking that the smart thing to do would be to keep on going until I found a cyclo or a taxi to take me back to safety.

I didn't make it. Across the narrow lane two women squatted together under a pastel raincoat. Bar girls probably, or street whores. One contemplated a fingertip just withdrawn from her nose, but the other saw me and grinned -- her teeth much darker than her powdered skin -- and gestured with her hand: come!

I don't know why, but I turned tale, leaving the gate as it was. I hurried back to the mansion and tried the door. It opened, and I stepped inside. I made sure to close it behind me.

The people at this installation had pulled out in a hurry as we had done. You would expect a decent sweep and mop job at least, but the floor still carried the outlines of recently departed desks, even a few cigarette butts. Maybe they planned to come back and tidy up before handing the estate back to a dragon lady in pointy sunglasses whose Mercedes would lead a convoy of old Chevrolets packed with servants and grandchildren and a Vietnamese army truck full of furnishings. She would not approve of what she found here. She

would be pissed. From the moment she entered the grounds she would be tallying in her mind the additional charges she would levy.

The emptiness spooked me. Once again I took the pistol from my map case and chambered a round. I headed for the stairs. My boots squished on the terrazzo floor. If this place was like ours, in the early days of shortages and improvisations it would have been blessed with an old master sergeant famous for scrounging and forever turning up with the stuff they needed most -- a refrigerator, a truck full of old desks and typewriters left over from the Military Assistance Command era; toilet seats, and cases of Shasta and San Miguel. Phase two would have been the great flood -- equipment and soldiers pouring in faster than they could be sorted out and shipped into the field, the swapping of cooks for wire splicers, personnel specialists for infantrymen. And today, I realized, was day one of phase three, as all the scattered headquarters outfits in the suburbs pulled up stakes, hauled ass out of Saigon and converged upon an isolated pre-fab city in the countryside where they would be safe behind minefields, wire, and patrolling tanks.

I wondered if here as at our headquarters a Cambodian maid with gold teeth had come clip-clopping up the stairs at this time of day, cupping a fresh-cut pineapple in her hands. Refreshment for the general. Where was she now, and on whose side?

I went through the outer office where NCOs had shuffled paper, through the chief of staff's office, and then into the splendid one, with the flags and red carpet and all the photographs and credentials on the walls -- now just a vacant master bedroom again.

At the window I watched a yellow dog lope through the gate, sniff some sandbags and mark them, then lope back to the lane. I was shivering. I checked my watch. Still not quite three. I looked again. The hands had not moved. In the excitement this morning I had forgotten to wind it.

I had to stay. You don't take to hostile streets just before nightfall. You find a corner in the dark and hunker down with your pistol. I had M&Ms and raisins in a plastic cigarette case, and I had fourteen rounds. And I was shivering so hard I made noise. Maybe it was fever, or maybe the wet clothes were getting to me, or maybe shaking like crazy was inevitable under the circumstances. A thumping headache had settled in, the kind I usually got from malaria pills, but this was not our day for malaria pills.

The open gate worried me out of all proportion. In the morning the lane would be choked

with trucks, buses, and taxicabs. I'd wave down a passing jeep and all would be well. But in the gathering dark that unsecured gate loomed large.

I wondered if this was my night to become a minor item in the news. If I prowled around I could probably locate a toilet, but for now I would stay put. I heard more muffled explosions followed by spasms of automatic fire. Up in the shadows a lizard was upset about something, like a customer rapping a coin on a glass counter.

I don't know how long I had been shivering and ruminating when suddenly the window was projected brightly against the far wall. The light blinked twice, as was the custom for military vehicles halting at a guarded entry.

They had come for me. My crusade had left me stranded, compelling busy men to send a rescue party. Go fetch junior. So much for my plunge into history.

I came uncoiled from my corner and crawled to the back of the room where I poked my head up just enough to see over the sill. Sure enough. Facing me at the far end of the driveway were the headlights of a jeep. I could imagine the guys inside -- pissed off to be sent on this chase in the first place, pissed off having to wait for the usual formalities at the gate, then baffled that no guard came forward to check the vehicle ID and give them a once over. I was tempted to open the window and shout: I learned my lesson! Take me back! Anything to keep them from turning around and speeding away. But they didn't. The jeep lurched forward.

I was prickly hot and kind of giddy. I went down the dark stairway harboring an eerie sense of them being out there, looking for me. I had become this lurking shadow, so devious that I could not bring myself to go boldly out the front door. Instead I went around to a screen door in the rear, easing it open and passing through a curtain of drizzle from the edge of the roof. A sudden whack-whack-whack of rotors thundered overhead. I stepped down into a yard flanked by buildings on three sides, like the area where morning formations had been held at our installation. A couple of flares popped and drifted down off in the direction of the airport, illuminating a startlingly intricate pattern of tire and boot tracks. Walls glowed Easter egg pink and seemed to creep and slide and eclipse one another. Carnival colors. I could almost smell popcorn and cotton candy.

I turned a corner half expecting to find a Ferris wheel lighting up the motor pool, but it was still empty, the beaten grass streaked with the glow of the flares. Keeping to the weeds under the overhanging roof, I went around one more corner and approached the front of the

mansion. The headlights were out, but I could hear the jeep idling. Here the building blocked the light of the descending flares, and all was in darkness. I worked my way around the front of the jeep and felt heat rising from the hood. I stepped cautiously for fear of tripping over the steps of the front porch, which had to be just ahead. Probably they were up there by the door, or were already inside.

That's when a familiar scent washed over me -- tobacco smoke, the perfumed, Vietnamese kind. An arm's length away a head turned, and I saw the pinpoint glow of a cigarette glinting in a pair of spectacles.

He might have been waiting for his street commandos to reassemble at his side, or maybe he just wanted an explanation. After all that planning and practice and risk-taking, they had penetrated their target, and the place was empty. What the hell?

I had to assume he had a weapon. I didn't have a choice. He was so close that the blunt nose of my pistol bumped his cheekbone. I squeezed the trigger. It was the biggest noise I ever heard.

I ran, and I heard others running too. What I needed was a roof over my head, so I went for the generator shed and hit the deck. A sheet of corrugated steel would have to do. Someone dashed by on the gravel drive, heading out the gate. Another figure was right on his heels. It was as though I had stirred up the whole nest. How many skinny kids carrying satchel charges would fit into a jeep? How many would they risk on a place like this?

The first to go up was the boxy two story between the mansion and the volleyball court. Chunks of cement block and stucco came thudding down on my roof. Then a great fluorescent ball of dust rolled out of the darkness, bringing a taste of metal. A flimsy tropical building went up next, all wood strips and screening, and it took forever for the debris to settle. Finally the windows blew out of the mansion and the whole masonry face came cascading down. Another dust cloud settled over me, and the only sound for the next minute or so was the flutter of typing paper falling out of the sky.

I always intended to check back to find out if more bodies had been found in the rubble, but I never did. I am certain of only one, my old main force regular. I kept pointing out to the MPs where he was buried under tons of brick and plaster. I insisted that he had not been killed by falling rubble but by one large caliber pistol round fired at close range, as they could discover for themselves. I was blanketed with masonry dust and I was shivering. I did

not have myself under very good control. I was just glad to see them, and I wanted them to know that I had not been hiding. I had been out in the middle of all this, playing a role in this story, for better or for worse.