

SAFE DUTY ASSIGNMENT

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Can Tho, South Vietnam, IV Corps, 1969-1970.

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The roosters started crowing at 0400 hours on that hot humid morning. Smoke filled the night air from the flares that floated down slowly on tiny parachutes over the base's perimeter. Someone was shooting at something with an M-16. Never had it been this busy on guard duty; Cobra gunships firing mini guns all night.

I turned twenty-one that night while serving in the Army, stationed in South Vietnam's southern delta near the Mekong River. My partner, Dave Kennedy, and I were assigned a tower on the perimeter of the Can Tho Airfield overlooking a South Vietnamese cemetery.

We received the call to stand down about two hours after sunrise. Dave took the M-60 machine gun to the armory while I took our M-16s and the grenade launcher back to the barracks.

I was assigned to the 1st Signal Company at Can Tho. We had a two-story barracks for the teletype operators and repair personal. I was one of only three responsible for the secure cryptographic transmission of secret messages received from Saigon, then sent on to remote out-posts in the IV-corps southern-delta area of South Vietnam. On this day, my birthday, I planned to take the day off and go downtown to spend time with my girlfriend.

As usual music was playing the latest hits from home. I placed Kennedy's M-16 on his bunk after making sure, again, the chamber was empty. What a shame if someone got shot in a place like Can Tho by accident; nothing ever happened in Can Tho. We were all so very lucky to be there in a safe place far from the war in the north.

I found my foot-locker pulled out and placed next to my bunk with four M-16 rifle magazines, ammo, and a can of Brasso metal polish on top. A sure sign Sergeant Wilbert Mack had been in my cubical and wanted to visit.

I liked Mack and he liked me for some reason, and we talked often. He had a football scholarship at Michigan State as a quarterback; the first Black QB. I saw him throw a football the width of our air field runway once while we were taking M-60 machine-gun target practice. His huge hands with long fingers allowed him the capability to be the fastest teletype operator on the old mechanical machines. He got into serious trouble in college dating the coach's seventeen-year-old daughter. He acknowledged repeatedly that white girls were easy, "they must be raised differently." Mack lost his football scholarship and avoided jail through the grace of the coach. He was drafted at nineteen within weeks after leaving school. After basic training he was sent to Vietnam for a twelve month tour in the 1st Infantry Division. His platoon, pinned down by North Vietnamese regular Army forces after about six months in-country, was getting their asses kicked. With dead and wounded all around him, Corporal Mack kept steady M-60 machine-gun fire for two hours, preventing the advance of the enemy until choppers came to the rescue. Lives were saved and he was awarded the Bronze Star and a promotion to buck-sergeant. After that traumatic event, Mack was judged mentally unfit for combat and discharge orders drawn up for his return home to Greensboro, North Carolina. Before he could board a plane back home new orders were issued; Sergeant

James Mack was to report to Can Tho Airfield for assignment as a teletype operator (he tested very high in typing during the assessment process in basic training) for the 1st Signal contingent. Mack also tested positive for syphilis and ordered to remain in-country for treatment until he tested negative for three consecutive months before allowed to return to the "world," aka, home.

We didn't have hot water so after a cold shower, which always felt good in that humidity, I made it back to my area.

Mack began, "Dig this, man. Lips. Check it out. Small lips on black women are beautiful, and large lips on white women are beautiful. Why is that?" Mack came up with out-of-the-blue statements all the time. Tall, six-three, slim, chocolate-brown and a hyper young man, he had a nervous habit (we all believed was combat related) of pulling on the front of his loose-fitting fatigue shirt as if it were too tight, then twisting his neck. He did this constantly that morning.

I stepped around him to my locker to get a clean uniform, cleaned and ironed by the US government employee maids we called Mamasans, and sat next to him. "What you know good, Mack?"

"Them Ma-ma San bitches didn't come to work today. We gonna get hit, sure as shit."

Mack added a pack of Salem cigarettes to the ammo and Brasso on my foot locker, plus a pack of marijuana cigarettes rolled with filters and packaged in sealed Salem packs. He was smoking one, drawing in deeply.

I said it must be a holiday or something. He slowly looked over at me after coating a bullet with Brasso. "Didn't you hear the B-52s dropping bombs last night, bro?"

"I heard thunder, Mack."

"Thunder! Nixon is kicking Viet Cong ass, dude. He is doing just what he said he would do. He is bombing the north, and the Cambodian Ho Chi Minh trail in preparation for the U.S. pull out. You heard the Trail blowing up, dude. The VC are pissed off now and will hit soft targets like this airfield. I'm getting ready for more shit, you should too."

Most of us Signal guys avoided Jim Mack because he would do things like the Brasso dip. If you were to shoot a man with a Brasso-coated round and didn't kill him, the Brasso would slowly poison him to death. He had an unsettling way of reminding us an ugly war was out there beyond the palm trees.

"Hay, dig this. That song, you hear it? "Black Magic Woman," he began again. "Is Santana singing about a *black-magic* woman or a black *magic-woman*? Something is hidden deep in that song."

I couldn't help it. "What did you say?"

"Is it a black-magic woman or a black, black magic-woman Carlos is singing about? I can't figure it out; it's trippin me out big time."

I wanted to sleep for a couple of hours so I stretched out on the bunk next to him while he sat working. I thought he would get the hint.

He continued, "That young kid singing lead with the Jackson Five, you hear him, he will be a solo super star in a few years. I told you first, remember that."

He took another cigarette and pulled out a zippo lighter and took a long drag. "Why is the Michelin Man white? He is supposed to be made of car tires. What's with that? Basketball is a winter sport, dude. Why do they play it in the summer Olympics?"

"Mack, I was up all night and I want to get to the city later."

“When this war is over, Nixon will be on Mt. Rushmore. I said it first, remember that too.”

Dave Kennedy was a little blond Irish kid from Connecticut. Sgt Jim once said his Liz Taylor blue eyes were wasted in his head and asked if his sister had eyes like his and if so he wanted to meet her. Dave got truly pissed off and had to be held back from going after Mack, prompting Mack to say, “If you want a long hair-hippie to fight, threaten to date his sister.” Rich was a radio DJ before joining the Army.

Rich came rushing over wearing only a wide smile and an olive-drab bath towel around his waist. “I just had a real good shit, man. It was so good.”

Mack couldn't let that go. He slowly rose, the marijuana cigarette smoking in the corner of his mouth, looked down at Kennedy. “I got something for your ass, boy. If that turd felt good meet me in the latrine. I'll give you every inch of my love. Deep down inside. You need love, you little rabbit.”

Kennedy meekly, and very softly looked up then said, “Sergeant Mack, I was taking malaria pills and they gave me diarrhea. Remember I told you and you suggested I stop taking them. I stopped a couple of days ago, Sergeant. I think I'm better now.”

“You better get serious, shit for brains,” Mack continued, pointing at him, “What the hell is that on your arm?”

“I got a peace-sign tattoo last week, Sergeant. Looks good, don't it?”

“You little shit, that's the footprint of the American chicken, you hippie maggot. You have disfigured government property, dumb nuts. Get out of here, and put your shirt on. If I see that insult again I'll bust a cap in your worthless ass! The flag, Kennedy! What's wrong with Old Glory, shit head? Listen to the words in the “Star Spangled Banner,” numb nuts. Get motivated, man! It's a fight song; a battle cry, dude. You should have run to Canada like the other hippies.” Startled, his beautiful eyes wide, Kennedy quickly walked away holding his government issue towel tightly.

Mack said to me, “So many good guys are dead and that little shit will live to reproduce little hippie Richie shits. That shit is just wrong.”

Mack placed his Brasso-coated M-16 rounds in a magazine while pulling on the front of his shirt with a cloud of smoke around his head. “Dig this. Did you hear that shit about Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin overdosing? That's more bullshit from them dam hippies just trying to get us to lose this war.” I hadn't noticed his M-16 under the bed. He pulled it out and began to disassemble it for cleaning.

“Did you fire your weapon last night, Mack?”

“Did I fire my weapon, you ask me?” His eyes were wide, red and crazed. “I got the little son of a two-dollar-whore. He is still in the wire as we speak, with a satchel of explosives on his necked, skinny ass. With no papasans around to get his body he'll be there all day. The CO wanted me to stand down and not open fire. I had the douche bag in my night-vision sights, I saw he had explosives. I'll probably be in trouble for firing, but what are they going to do to me; I'm diagnosed crazy.”

“You killed a VC last night? That was you doing all that shooting?” I said as I raised up from the bunk.

“You're twenty-one today. Happy birthday, my man, that's groovy. Hopefully I'll be home with my girl on my twenty-first.” He placed the aluminum firing pin in his mouth next to the cigarette, speaking softly as if to himself.

I would get no more info from him about the VC in the concertina wire. Whenever he thought of his twenty-eight year old married girlfriend he drifted off. His girl promised to get a divorce when he got home. Jim Mack seemed so much older than we were, but he was one of the younger guys in the Communications Center.

"Don't believe that shit about Jimi and Janis either," he blurted. "No way Janis overdosed, man. She only drinks Southern Comfort, for shit sake. And Jimi knows better than to get high like he does alone. The hippies are trying to get in our heads with lame ludicrous falsehoods."

He pushed the rod down the barrel. "When I got to this arm-pit of a country, I had one ribbon on my uniform, and I was a PFC. Now I have three rows of medals and I'm a sergeant, all in less than a year. After all the shit that's happened, I'm not gonna die in this country club called Can Tho. Hey, check this. You are a man beginning today, bro, can you dig it?"

After a long moment of silence I said, "What was I yesterday? What was I when I stepped forward and took the oath? They wouldn't be sending boys home in body bags, now would they?"

"Right on, bro! I'm rubbing off on you, dude." He took a marijuana cigarette in a sealed Salem pack out of his mouth and pointed it at me, "Hit the herb, brother man, it's a big day. Congratulations. Take my herb, drink my wine." He used lines from his favorite Rock songs in his rants.

I took it and stood up and opened my locker to get my cap and said, "Let's go get some chow. You finished?"

"I see you still have the launcher, let me have it. You got the grenades?"

"No grenades. This is Can Tho, not Da Nang," I said, passing the launcher.

"Who is that in your locker?"

My father sent me a life size poster of Freda Payne. She had a hit song, *Bring the Boys Home*, but her biggest hit was *Band of Gold* in 1969. "That's Freda Payne, all five foot two of gorgeousness."

"She's cute. You can see what I was talking about; she has those small lips. That is so bizarre to me. Elizabeth Taylor, Marilyn Monroe, and even Jane Mansfield had plump lips. Lena Horn and Diahann Carroll have little bird lips; beautiful women. But the best mouth and sexiest voice of all time belongs to Maria Montez. You remember her in all those Aladdin Movies? Damn!" Mack was drifting off into his "self" again. After a moment he began, "My girl in Michigan has lips like Mick Jagger; only ruby red. I have never met a woman like her, dude, a beautiful nymphomaniac she was. White girls are raised differently. Getting high and getting down every night and going to class the next day, it was crazy. *Love the one you're with*, literally."

"Do you still hear from her?"

"She writes all the time. I think she blames herself for me being over here. I write her once in a while to reassure her I'm not dead. She seems so sad. I'm done. This country boy is going home to marry my Mother Mary." He called his girl, Mary, from the Jimi Hendrix song "The Wind Cries Mary" and the Beatles' "Mother Mary Comes to Me." Mary was marijuana in the songs and he loved both equally.

"Hey, I need to take the M-16 and the launcher to my locker and take a psycho pill. Kennedy gave me a rush; that shouldn't have happened. I'm beginning to think the

tetracycline and my crazy meds are causing me problems. I'm very short tempered these days; very uncharacteristic. I'll have to apologize to the little hippie-shit."

"I'll meet you at the mess hall." Mack went out the back to the sergeant barracks. I went to the front door and was stopped by Kennedy, holding a letter. "Does Sergeant Mack think I'm gay?"

"No, Rich, he's having a bad day. That was from Led Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love*. You know how he is, you guys are good working buddies. He killed a VC in the wire last night."

"That was him firing last night? No way, it must have been an old Papasan out there on the perimeter. Crazy Mack killed a civilian, dude. No VC around here." Dave Kennedy lived his days in Can Tho as if he were on a Boy Scout summer camping trip.

"We're going to chow, you want to go?" I asked.

"I think I got a Dear John letter yesterday. I need to read this over again. She's trying to tell me something without saying it."

Mack didn't show up at the mess hall. I walked to the PX for my monthly ration of two bottles of liquor. I added a box of Kotex to my purchase. My girl was using a folded handkerchief; she was truly on the rag last week. With a fifth of Jack Daniels and another of Wild Turkey in my over-sized paint pockets designed for carrying ammo, and a special surprise in a brown paper bag, I headed for the "red light" district of Can Tho.

If you were dressed as an American soldier, in olive drab, extending a thumb, someone on a little Honda would pick you up for a dollar then take you anywhere in the city.

I jumped off the bike and walked toward my girl's apartment on that hot humid morning to the usual rancid smell of rotting food, and this time a large potbelly pig and

1: Hoa's glamour shot. Can Thou, SVN, 1969.



several chickens rooting through garbage placed on the side of the wide street of crumbling asphalt and dirt with deep pot-holes filled with stinky muddy water. Three children were herding quacking ducks to the river. The aroma of street vendors cooking spicy Vietnamese food and baking bread was a daily constant. People crossed the street from any point they chose with little regard to motor traffic which, would be coming from any direction. The putt-putt of scooters flashing by with beautiful young women in white clothing hanging on for dear life to young Vietnamese soldiers drowned out most other sounds. The sky was bluer than blue with giant scurrying white clouds so low they seemed just out of reach.

Two doors away from her apartment, I saw her crossing the street. She wore a tiny white sleeveless dress about two inches above her slightly bowed knees, ivory legs

with just the hint of calf muscle. Through her thin cotton dress, in the sunlight, her golden nipples could be seen on small motionless unsupported breasts. Her silken raven-

black hair to her hips was loose. Tiny tan leather flip-flops with silver studs adorned beautiful little red pedicured feet. Four feet ten inches tall and ninety pounds of Chinese-Vietnamese Princess; Can Tho royalty. She carried herself as if floating across the dusty street; a precious stone on a sandy beach. She had very little hips and no booty to speak of, but there was a lot of motion under that dress. Amazing. Mack would say, "Back field in motion."

I quickened my pace to approach her from behind. I softly called her name, "*Hoa*," Vietnamese for flower or blossom.

Hoa nonchalantly looked over her shoulder without stopping and said in perfect non-accented English, "Oh my God!" Before I could say another word she executed a one-eighty and walked pass me, head down, and a wave of her hand at the ground behind her, the signal to follow. Nice young ladies never walked nor talked to GIs in public. I followed her back to her apartment building.

We communicated by using a gutter mixture of slang Vietnamese, slang English and French. She was eager to learn English quickly.

As soon as we passed the threshold's steel door she took my hand and led me the few steps away so others couldn't see us, turned slowly around, placing my right hand around her waist looking up at me. "You funny GI. Why you come now?"

"I want to see you now," I said, sweat dripping down my face. Hoa always had a pleasant, cool moistness on the most humid of days, she never perspired. "I have whiskey for you." I never knew how much she got for selling American booze and cigarettes on the black market, but I do know it made her very happy to get them.

She looked down at my pockets and smiled. "You *number-one* GI. You *number one* for me all time. Come, we di-di." She took my hand and we marched up the three flights of stairs (no elevator) to her one-room apartment.

The stairs spiraled up the center of the three-story building to the roof. Rooms on each floor opened to the staircase. The voices of adults and the cries of babies echoed off plastered walls. A hallway did not exist in that narrow apartment house designed to allow the heat to escape when the ground floor doors were opened and the huge sky light was raised. Hot air rises bringing cooler air from the ground floor, creating a wind tunnel up the spiral staircase. Doors on the third floor were often kept open for the breeze.

Hoa opened her unlocked door, then turned around and shouted something in Vietnamese down the stair case. We walked into the small fifteen by twenty feet box of a room that had one window and one door. A queen size bed under the window with Playboy Playmates for 1968 on the wall where the head board would be. The bathroom-shower, next to another room, was shared by all on the third floor. She turned on the two large fans, then spoke to the young girl that came in. Hoa hired the girl to iron her clothes with the steam iron I bought her a week prior. I awkwardly stood next to the large bed while they spoke in their bird-like language; cooing back-and-forth like Mourning Doves.

I placed the bag on the bed and took the Wild Turkey out of my pocket. Hoa took out the other bottle and I handed her the Turkey.

"You *number one* for me, *Pineapple*." My name, Thom, translated into Vietnamese is Pineapple, and she thought it endearing and witty to use the English translation. She placed the bottles on her Victorian-style steamer trunk, then came back and pushed me

down on the bed as she had playfully done in the past. She jumped on the bed next to me, crossed her legs, bouncing up and down happily. I took the box out of the bag, then handed her the gift of Kotex.

She whispered, "Oh my God," her black exotic almond eyes tearing up. Soon black eye liner ran down her alabaster cheeks. Her full naturally pink lips quivered.

Hoa reverently placed her gift, and the bottles, inside the trunk as if she were in deep thought, a little wrinkle between her eye brows, while squatting, then came back to sit next to me as before. She took my hand and placed it on her cute little foot and gently gave my hand a squeeze encouraging me to massage her lovely toes. We touched like this often; kissing was rare in South East Asia.

She looked down at my hand on her soft foot then said, "You love me beaucoup. I never know GI love me same-same you. You number one for me for sure." She looked into my eyes, with mascara staining her cheeks then suddenly pushed me over to take my wallet out of my hip pocket. She took out twenty dollars then gave the wallet back. "I go work now. You give Mamasan money, we come back I love you long time."

"You go work, I stay. I go sleep two, maybe three hours."

"No! You di-di same-same me. We talk Mamasan; you give money, I sleep with you. Get up! Di-di!"

I followed her at a respectful distance to the *White Horse* bar and took a seat in the



2: *White Horse Bar - Tom Johnson and Hoa, 1969*

same booth I met Hoa three months earlier. She worked as a Saigon Tea Girl.

The *White Horse*, a respectable bar, served drinks and Vietnamese sandwiches to GIs. The place was well lit with Asian ambiance, the spicy aroma of incense, and framed pictures of dragons on the walls. A large fat smiling Buddha greeted you at the door, and a lovely Tea Girl would escort the GI to one of the large vinyl-covered booths, then sit down with him to take his order and a Saigon Tea (Kool-Aide) for herself.

Hoa came over and sat in my lap then put her arm around my shoulders to whisper in my ear, "You buy me tea, I talk to Mamasan." She kissed my ear, and then jumped up to get my usual, an American Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, and her tea.

Mamasan, a very attractive thirtyish light-brown woman, rushed from the back to the front door talking rapidly to the tea girls.

Hoa jumped off my lap and said something to the other girls, then moved to the booth seat facing me and watched Ma-Ma at the door as if expecting instructions.

A masculine voice outside spoke Vietnamese loudly. A young man with wild looking eyes as if he were on uppers, wearing all black, confidently walked up to Mamasan talking rapidly. Mamasan took the man by the arm and led him to the small counter. He sat on a stool while she spoke to him.

Hoa said, "No look him eye, Pineapple. He *number ten*."

She didn't have to tell me twice. I stared down at my can of Pabst and she did the same with her little shot glass of Kool Aide. We must have looked like we were saying Grace over our drinks.

Mamasan began chirping. Hoa and the other girls talked all at the same time while moving toward Mamasan and the wild-eyed guy in uniform.

Hoa said, "You di-di, Pineapple, not good here."

"I'll wait for you at your place."

She stood over me and hit me in the chest with her fist. "No! You go back airfield." Then in a quieter voice she said, "Come back tomorrow." She reached for my watch and pointed to the three, "How you say, *tree*?" I nodded. "You come back *tree*, tomorrow. Pineapple, no be stupid. Di-di now, *got damn--di-di*!"

She scared the shit out of me. She never cursed before; in English anyway. I briskly walked out as Hoa moved toward Mamasan and the crazy guy. I wanted to tell her I had to work tomorrow all day, but didn't want to be stupid.

At the main road, a US Army truck picked me up after about three minutes of hitch-hiking. I joined two other GIs in the back going to the airfield. Before I got seated, a loud explosion from the road in front of us knocked me to the floor. The truck driver informed us a South Vietnamese Army jeep blew up and the driver was on the road, not moving. From the back of the large duce-and-a-half truck, we couldn't see until we drove around the jeep's axel, and saw the smoking wreckage in the ditch. The South Vietnamese soldier was setting in the road with both legs out front, his upper body leaning forward, arms at his sides like a rag doll, unmoving. The driver increased his speed to get away from any further danger.

I made it to the sanctuary of the airfield, shaking. What was going on? A bad looking Vietnamese man, perhaps VC. A deadly explosion. I crawled onto my bunk with my boots on, not where I had planned to sleep this morning.

Kennedy woke me, "Where is your helmet, Dude?"

I opened my eyes and jumped up, thinking I was late for guard duty before I realized I had been on guard duty twenty-four hours ago. "What are you doing, Rich? Why is it so dark in here? Turn on the lights." I was confused.

"We're getting hit, man," he said grinning, as he pulled my helmet out of my locker, handing it to me. "The airfield is taking incoming; get your weapon. Sergeant Mack sent me to wake you up, we're in the bunker. Di-di, man, move it!"

The communications team bunker was a large Tuff Shed like building with green sand bags all around it, and on the flat roof. Four beams inside reinforced the weight of the ceiling. A gas generator outside in the back powered the beer-filled refrigerator, fans, and lights. Swirling smoke from marijuana, opium, and cigarettes gave the bunker a ghostly atmosphere in the low light. Cots were provided for those who slept.

In the middle of this spacious bunker, Sergeant Jim Mack and three others were playing Tonk for money. A southern card game he introduced to us signal guys. "The birthday boy has arrived. How's it hangin, birthday man?"

"Someone tell me what's happening."

Mack chimed in while studying his cards, "The Viet Cong are firing rockets at the airfield. My man Tricky Dicky Nixon has pissed them off big time. Right on! You gotta love it."

“What happened to you at chow, Mack?” I asked.

“Had to fill out an incident report because I fired after I was told to stand down. Nonstop bullshit, man.”

I sat on a couple of sandbags against a wall. I was hungry, but only beer would be in the box. I picked up a C-ration.

Mack was holding court. “Lyons, you a religious man?”

“I guess. Why?” Lyons asked, rearranging cards in his hand.

“Evolution is in the Bible. Everyone listen up. In Genesis, every day that God created something it was better than the day before. Right? God created man, then he created woman. Woman, therefore, is more evolved than man. Did you all hear me?”

No response from anyone; we heard this revelation from him before.

The First Sergeant, a fiftyish, skinny Floridian, came in with his booming voice, “Sergeant Mack! You in here?”

“Yeah. What’s the matter?” Mack said.

“Report to the CO at 0800 hours tomorrow.”

“I copy that, Sergeant Jolly,” Mack said sarcastically as he put a dollar on the table.

Russo looked up from his cot and asked, “First Sergeant, how is the war going out there?”

“Just one rocket, it hit one of the ammo dumps causing all the other detonations. The choppers got the launcher.” The First Sergeant reported.

Mack began, “You know, Jolly, if I were a cop back home and shot an American citizen all I would have to say is I feared for my life; nothing would be done to me. Here we are in a war zone with stricter rules of engagement than cops back home shooting citizen-minorities and red-necks. Ludicrous.” Mack jumped up, kicking the card table against the wall, knocking the players off their seats. They all scrambled after the bottle of Jim Beam that fell in the dirt. Mack grabbed his helmet and weapon, locked and loaded a round, then stormed out past the First Sergeant.

“Take your pills before reporting to the CO, Sergeant Mack.” Jolly called after him. “Hey people, you need to stop smoking that shit. We still may need people dispatched to the perimeter tonight.” The sergeant finished and walked out mumbling something about a wasted generation.

Several days later I received a letter from Mack. He was on his way home, writing me from Tan Son Nhut air base. Can Tho Air Field’s Commanding Officer issued orders for his discharge, and he was to receive another Bronze Star for his heroic actions while under imminent enemy threat, saving lives and property. It turned out the First Signal Battalion had never given a Bronze Star for heroic actions while under fire before. This was an opportunity for the CO to add enemy combat engagement to his military records.

Mack lamented in his letter:

“Twenty months and I have more medals (three full rows) than Sergeant Jolly with twenty years service. I don’t even have a Purple Heart, the only one I truly deserve. But at least my blood work is still testing good.

“Do me a favor. Write my girl in Michigan, I’ll give you her address, and let her know I’m home okay. I’m done with the past, and ready to go full ahead with life.

“The Army offered me a ten thousand dollar re-up bonus and a promotion to E-6 and a guarantee of a stateside duty assignment because of my mental issues. They offered to pay for my continued education if I go to Officer Candidate School. I’m keeping all options

open, even that one. I feel the pressure already trying to think about my future after the Nam.

"I'll send you my Greensboro, North Carolina address when I get home so we can keep in touch. Meet me at Mount Rushmore for the Nixon ground breaking. The war is over for both of us; you made it, my man.

"I forgot the seeds Papasan gave me. Get some more from him and send them to me. Vietnam has the best herb in the world. I could take up farming. My Granddaddy farmed tobacco; growing weed is in my blood."

I never heard from Mack again.

After the rocket attack, we were restricted to base for two weeks. I was going through Hoa-withdrawals; worried about that strange-guy and her behavior. As soon as I could get away I made it to the *White Horse* Tea Bar and received my "Oh my God!" greeting. We continued where we left off last time. I gave Mamasan thirty dollars (the amount Hoa would have made that day, with a little extra) and spent the day and night with her. We never spoke of the mystery man.

I was getting to Can Tho regularly, about every two days, and on a visit after she cooked a duck on her electric hot plate wok on the floor (she could squat like a two-year old for hours) for dinner we were playing around (she loved to ride on my back horsey style) I stopped and asked her, "Would you like to come to America?"

Her smile went away. Her pupils were invisible, in dark eyes suspended in pure white. After a long pregnant pause she spoke softly. "You stupid GI, Pineapple. Why you be stupid to me?" She was getting louder and those eyes were beginning to drown in tears. "I no go America. I go America, you see America girl." She pointed at the Play Boy centerfolds over her bed. She pointed to Miss May's breast. "America girl!" She screamed. She unbuttoned her blouse to expose her perfect rock-solid B-cup breast. "This Hoa! I *number ten!*" She waved up and down over her body. "Where I go when you go be with got damn round eye America girl? I no stupid, Pineapple!" She was full-blown crying and yelling. Her ebony eyes were melting; dripping black from her tiny chin.

"Hold on, Hoa, I'll never leave you. I didn't mean... American girl no look like that, Hoa. I like the way you look. American girl same-same you." She was breathing hard and crying very loudly. "You beaucoup dap....beaucoup dap, Hoa. You very beautiful." I wanted to hold her, but knew better.

"You lie! You go! You no come back!" she screamed, pounding me on the chest as hard as she could; scaring the shit out of me, again.

I backed up in a circle trying to get away from her petite fists. "Hoa! I can't go. It's after curfew time."

"You go! Got damn you, stupid!" She stopped. She stood with arms down, hands fisted, the fan blowing her long raven hair and blouse up and away from her body, nipples and lips forming three points of matching pink (searing into my memory) against her pale white flawless body. Her eyes dripping black, but my mind was seeing red blood dripping as if she were a ravenous bride of Dracula. I felt panic overtaking me. I didn't know what she might do next, or who might come in to help her kick me out. Be better to take my chances with the MPs that patrolled the streets after 8 o'clock.

Every door was open with familiar faces gawking grimly at me as I ran down the stairs. I could still hear Hoa wailing over the hammering of my heart as I reached the dark street.

I traveled fifty yards toward the main road when my man with the little motorcycle pulled up and took me to the closed airfield gate. While I was giving him a generous tip a two-and-a-half ton Army truck pulled up and the gate opened. I walked in on the opposite side from where the guard stood. I was very lucky that night.

Maybe Hoa was bipolar and couldn't help it, I said to myself as I replayed that night over and over. But I also promised myself it was over. She knew GIs had been killed and robbed after curfew, she didn't care about me. I stayed away for six weeks.

I worked a half day and took off to the *White Horse* Tea Bar. I looked around for Hoa, but didn't see her.

Mamasan came over. "Pineapple, long time no see you."

"Where is Hoa, Mommy San?"

"I have new girl," she said while calling a very pretty French-Vietnamese young girl over. "She *number one* for you."

"Thank you, Mommy San, she *beaucoup* dap. Is Hoa here?"

"Pineapple, Hoa no work here. You buy tea for new girl, she say you dap."

"Where Hoa go?" I asked, loudly. I was irritated.

"Okay, I know you long time, you good GI; Hoa good girl. Hoa work *American Eagle Club*."

I knew the *American Eagle*. It was a big club in downtown Can Tho that served American food and drinks to mostly US Officers and lifers. They also had live entertainment until curfew most nights. It was considered a high-end club; on par with clubs in Saigon.

I jumped on a motor-cycle rickshaw taxi to the *American Eagle*. The club was on the bottom floor of a three-story French Colonial-style building. The building was leased by the US Government, which occupied the other two floors for Army Administration functions.



The club had a high spacious ceiling with American ambiance. Flags from all fifty states were hanging down over the customers, posters of sports stars adorned the walls along with American muscle cars, Mustangs, Camaros, and Indy cars. The jukebox played Elvis Presley songs. Hamburgers and New York steaks were served by young women in traditional Vietnamese dress of loose satin pants with a silk sleeveless garment that fit firmly on top, then flowed to the knees front and back in two parts of semi-transparent silk that complemented the pants. The girls wore the same outfits with different color combinations, and all had long hair French braided on the head then into one long glossy fishtail braid to the butt. The club also provided a gym, and massage along with manicures given by ten-year-

old girls who moved from booth to booth carrying tiny cases, soliciting their skill. A lot of the married GIs took advantage of the massage with “you want happy end,” or better known as a steam-and-cream; some guys on a regular appointment schedule. For more intimacy, next door was the *Green Door* with dozens of attractive girls to choose from who were tested weekly by US doctors for clean and healthy status.

The girls in the club would bring food and drink to the customers, US, Australian, Canadian, South Korean, Thai, and civilian contractors. The girls sat with the customer and engaged in small talk, or not depending on the patron’s mood. This must have been Vietnam’s version of Japan’s Geisha.

I was approached by a very pretty, tall, beautifully brown Indian girl who wore traditional Indian dress, which was similar to the Vietnamese dress except she had a pattern of pink tiny flowers on her outfit and a red dot on her forehead. She was the hostess/manager. “Welcome,” she said in perfect British-accented English. “How many?”

“Just me. May I sit at the counter?”

“Yes, of course. Do you have a favorite girl to take your order?”

Taken aback, I said, “Hoa,” possibly too loudly.

“Sir, we have several young ladies by that name. Do you see her?”

I did, sitting with a group of five officers and three girls in a large booth in the center of the large hall. “She is sitting there.” I nodded in the direction. “Next to the Major.”

“Would you like to wait for her?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Sir, please order a drink from Danny while you wait. I’ll let Hoa know you are here.”

She floated over to where Hoa was seated, and spoke to her. Hoa looked at me and her face changed from serious to a shy blushing smile. I was relived and felt a new fondness for her after that receptive eye contact and her Mona Lisa like smile. She spoke at length to the hostess.

The lovely hostess returned. “My name is Sharmila, Hoa tells me that you are a very special friend and that she is happy to see you. She wants me to tell you that she will complete her shift at 6 o’clock. Hoa would like you to meet her at her apartment.”

I thanked her, finished my beer, and walked out without looking back while Charley Pride sang, “All I have to offer you is me,” feeling great. I had about two hours to stroll the beautiful French-Colonial city with its huge tropical trees, lovely parks, and busy market place.

Danny, the bartender, drove up to the apartment house with two girls on the back of his Suzuki. Hoa got off gracefully and very coolly took my hand and led me into the building where we embraced like so many times before. She kissed me on the mouth, something she rarely did, but something I always tried to encourage. I took it as a welcome-back gesture, or perhaps forgiving me for being so naive. Without speaking she took my hand and we trotted up the three flights of stairs.

The door was open. The young girl was ironing clothes on a board on the floor in the hot room, with both fans blowing. Hoa looked up at me with new eyes, no longer just black mascara, she had her eyelids shaded in a light green that matched her top. The liner under her eyes extended longer, creating a lovely exotic Asian look. Her eyebrows were thinner and longer too.

“You look beautiful.” I said. “Beaucoup dap, Hoa.”

"Thank you. You look for me at *American Eagle*? Why you no come for me long time, Pineapple?" She said demurely, looking down at my boots, as I held her close by the waist.

"I made you mad at me."



3: Glamour photo of Hoa.

She turned to the girl and spoke to her while moving to her steamer chest. The girl answered but continued to work. Hoa opened the chest and gracefully squatted down and began to move items around. She took something out and came back over to where I stood in the middle of the room.

"Have a seat," she said, leading me over to the bed and pushing me down playfully.

"Hoa, you speak English good."

"I go to English school now. You will help me talk English, okay?" she asked, standing over me with smiling eyes, holding a little box.

"Good for you. Yes, I will help you with English." I nodded at the box. "What is that?" She pulled out a gold chain with a little Buda hanging from it. "You been away long time. Are you a Butterfly now?" she asked with daggers in her eyes, very

seriously.

A Butterfly is a GI who has many girlfriends, like a butterfly sticking his nose in all the pretty flowers. Nice girls are very concerned about illnesses spread by the GI Butterfly.

"No. I number one for you; always and forever."

She placed the ivory Buddha around my neck and kissed me on the neck. She also gave me several professional pictures of herself in different poses to be placed in my wallet, then she jumped into my lap, laughing and hugging until I rolled over on my back. She was happy. I was now a marked man. No other girl would ever talk to me with Buddha near my heart and pictures of Hoa near my money.

"I can sing song for you." She started to sing, "One little, two little, three little Indians," in the sweetest little voice, then she and the girl started in on "Ball in the Jack" in perfect harmony.

"You are very smart to learn so much English so fast," I said, very proud of her.

She sat up. "What state are you from? How long have you been in Vietnam? May I get something for you?"

She had to be able to speak English small talk to be successful at her new job. She was going to be good.

She held my hand. "You stay long time?"

"No. Not tonight. I'll come back in two days and stay long time."

"Okay." She smiled, speaking slowly. "You come back on, how you say, Thursday?"

“Yes. You speak so well. I’ll be back Thursday after your work.” I stood up. “I better go, it’s getting late.” Nice young ladies who have male visitors for a short visit will always have someone in the room. If I were to stay the night, the young girl would be asked to leave. No “quickies.”

At the door, I reached into my big shirt pocket and pulled out a pale green jade ring bracelet I had ordered a month ago from the Japanese PX catalog. I held it up for her to see. Her eyes pooled with tears. “Oh my God!” then Hoa spoke quickly to the young girl (who may have been her little sister now that I think about it) to bring her something to remove her makeup. After the beautifully applied eye makeup was removed she put her tiny hand through the little bracelet, then jumped into my arms and wept for five minutes onto my shirt. I held her little body lovingly.

That Thursday morning, after guard duty, the First Sergeant came in and told all of us that the US military was pulling out of Vietnam, ASAP. We were to be flown to Saigon to be shipped home in the second wave (because we were support troops) after civilian personal. I knew this day would come, but not that suddenly. I had plenty of time to get back to Hoa, thank goodness. I had a plan for us.

After hearing the news that we were pulling out all of the GIs, we naïvely assumed the war was over. We had won, and the DMZ would stay where it was, the bad guys would stay up north and the south would be a peaceful place for peaceful farmers. Nixon’s campaign promise to have the South Vietnamese take control of their country’s security had begun.

I met Hoa at the *American Eagle*, the next day, and set her down in a booth rather than talk to her at home hoping she would be better composed in public. “All of the GIs are going back to America, Hoa, the war is over. I need a phone number from you and address to send letters to you. I will come back for you so you can visit me in California. If you don’t like it in America I’ll send you back home. I want to take care of you.”

“You love too much, Pineapple.” She said smiling. “I hear already all GI go home.

“Come, you walk with me short time.”

We walked toward the hotel plaza district for two blocks, her in front and me following in a hypnotic trance caused by her unbelievable poetic rhythms in motion. Hoa stopped in front of a woman dressed in western fashion, about twenty-eight years of age, five feet tall in black three inch high sandals; pretty little feet, toes painted turquoise. Perfectly shaped brick-house legs and thighs with a petite white sleeveless silk mini-dress that failed to hide her magnificence. She wore a large black jade Italian horn necklace trapped between large full breast on a thick gold chain. Her hair was short and jet black with a beautiful round face. An Asian Betty Boop is how I will remember Hoa’s mother. She was skillfully cutting hair (harvesting) from a young woman’s head in a light breeze in a beautiful French colonial court yard under a giant Banyan tree in front of the French built Grand Hotel. She would quickly cut the beautiful long black hair, place the hair in a brown paper bag, write a note on the bag then trim the remaining short hair into a Beatle cut. She paid the young lady for her hair then turned to Hoa with a lovely smile, speaking to her at the same time motioning to her next long haired customer.

My father once advised me to always meet a girl friend’s mother before falling in love to see how the girl friend will look in the future. “Daddy, you gotta see what I got.”

While measuring the hair, Hoa’s mother looked at me with unsmiling black eyes and spoke: “You want to take Hoa to United States?”

“Yes, I would like her to come visit me to see if she would like to live there with me, which would include marriage of course if she wants to.”

“Can you take her now? Not good here.” She asked me.

“I have six more months in the Army, then I’ll come back here for her.”

“You no come back. Communist come soon, nobody go, nobody come.” She said as if it were common knowledge. She spoke to Hoa who began to write on a small piece of paper. Hoa took my arm, we walked away; interview over.

“Mommy-san say you good GI, but stupid. She mad at all GI. GI say they stay in Vietnam long time, now all GI go, Viet Cong come take everything.”

“She is wrong,” I pleaded, “the war is over, no more VC.”

The note was an address and a phone number. “Where is this?”

Hoa nodded her head at the huge hotel, “My Papasan in Army, live in hotel with Mamasan. Pineapple, no more *American Eagle*, no GI come. I help Mommy-san sell hair to India man for wig.”

“You write letter; we talk on telephone. Please, you no make me mad for you, Pineapple, you make me crazy when you stupid man.”

I wrote often, from Fort Hood, Texas, and she wrote, but not as much. Her life was chaotic. Soon her letters stopped. I called and spoke to Captain Bing Lin, her father, and learned he had sent his wife and two daughters to Thailand as refugees. He believed Saigon would fall in mere days. All was lost.

I received a letter from her a year later. She asked me not to reply; it would be disrespectful to her husband who was also her sponsor. She lives in Australia now not far from her mother and little sister who both liked me very much. The Australian government would only admit female Vietnamese refugees. They seem to still have a female shortage down under.

That was it. Not meant to be; two ships passing in bright sun light going in opposite directions happy to see one another, but never to meet again. It hurt a lot and took more time than I had realized to rehab. It is very frustrating when events happen and you have no control.

With the help of the internet I found old James Mack a few years ago. Part of our conversation went like this: “How have you been Jim?”

“Every time I hear about a marijuana bust in California I think about your thieving little cherry ass! Where my seeds at, man?”

“I miss you too, dude.”

Although my story is true, names are fictitious.