

ONE

The Fall

April 28, 1975

The city teetered in a dream state. Helen walked down the deserted street. The quiet was eerie. Time running out. A long-handled barber's razor, cradled in the nest of its strop, lay on the ground, the blade's metal grabbing the sun. Unable to resist, she leaned down to pick it up, afraid someone would split his foot open running across it. A crashing noise down the street distracted her—dogs overturning garbage cans—and she snatched blindly at the razor. Drawing her hand back, she saw a bright pinprick of blood swelling on her finger. She cursed at her stupidity and kicked the razor, strop and all, to the side of the road and hurried on.

The unnatural silence allowed Helen to hear the wailing of the girl. The child's howl was high and breathless, defiant, rising, alone and forlorn against the buildings, threading its way through the air, a long, plaintive note spreading its complaint. Helen crossed the alley and went around a corner to see a small child of three or four, hard to tell with the unrelenting malnourishment, standing against the padlocked doorway of a bar. Her face and hair were drenched with the effort of her crying. She wore a dirty yellow cotton shirt sizes too large, bottom bare, no shoes. Dirt circled between her toes.

The pitiful scene begged a photo. Helen hesitated, hoping an adult would come out of a doorway to rescue the child. She had only days or hours left in-country. Breathless, the girl staggered a few steps forward to the curb, eyes flooded in tears, when a man on a bicycle flew around the corner, pedaling at a furious speed, clipping the curb and almost running her down. Helen lurched forward without thinking, grabbed the girl's arm and pulled her back, speaking quickly in fluent Vietnamese: "Little girl, where is Mama?"

The child hardly looked at her, the small body wracked with sobs. Helen's throat constricted. A mistake, stopping. A pact made to herself that at this late date she wouldn't get involved. The street rolled away in each direction, empty. No woman approached them.

Tired, Helen knelt down so she was at eye level to the child. In a head-long lunge, the girl wrapped both arms around Helen's neck. Her cries quieted to soft cooing.

"What's your name, honey?"

No answer.

"Should I take you home? Home? To Mama? Where do you live?"

Rested, the girl began to sob again with more energy, fresh tears.

No good deed goes unpunished. The camera bag pulled, heavy and bulky. As she held the girl, walking up and down the street to flag attention, it knocked against her hip. She slipped the shoulder strap off and set it down on the ground, all the while talking under her breath to herself: "What are you doing? What are you doing? What are you doing?" The child was surprisingly heavy, although Helen could feel ribs and the sharp, pinionlike bones of shoulder blades. The legs that wrapped viselike around Helen's waist were sticky, a strong scent of urine filling her nostrils.

A stab of impatience. "I've got to go, sweetie. Where is Mama?"

She bounced the girl to quiet her and paced back and forth. Her mind wasn't clear; why was she losing her precious hours, involving herself now, when she had passed hundreds of desperate children before? But she had heard this one's cries so clearly. A sign? A sign she was losing it was more like it, Linh would say.

A young woman hurried across the intersection, glanced at Helen and the child, then looked away.

The orphanage was overflowing. Should she take the girl home with her? Once they abandoned this corner, she would be Helen's responsibility. Could she take her out of the country with Linh? What had she been thinking to stop? Was it a trap? By whom? Was it a test? By what?

Helen stroked the girl's hair, irritated. She had a heart-shaped face, ears like perfect small shells. A bath and a nice dress would make her quite lovely.

Ten, fifteen minutes passed. The idea of this being a sign seemed more stupid by the minute. Not a soul came, nothing except the tinny, popping sound of guns far away. Helen toyed with the idea of putting the girl back down. Surely the family was close by, was searching for her. No harm done in keeping the girl company for a few minutes. Not her responsibility, after all. When she began to kneel to deposit her back on the ground, the girl's arms tightened to a choke hold around her neck, and Helen, resigned, strained back up. All wrong; a terrible mistake. A proof that she was failing. Linh would be worrying by now, might even try to go out to find her.

Helen bent and fished for the strap of her camera bag, putting it on the other shoulder to balance the weight. Maybe it *was* a sign. Insane, but what else could she do but take the child with her?

Halfway down the street, a woman's voice yelled from behind them. Helen turned to see a plain, moonfaced woman with thin, cracked lips stride toward them.

"Are you her mother?" Helen asked, guilt welling up. "I wasn't trying to take her—"

The woman yanked the girl out of Helen's arms, eyes pinched hard. The girl whimpered as the mother swatted her on the leg and scolded her.

"She couldn't tell me where she lived," Helen said.

But the mother had already turned without another glance and stalked away. The girl looked over the mother's shoulder, dark eyes expressionless. In a few more steps, they disappeared around the corner.

For the briefest moment Helen felt wronged, missed the weight on her hip and the sticky legs, but then the feeling was gone. How had the mother been so neglectful anyway? It rankled that she had not been thanked or even acknowledged for her effort. But with the shedding of that temporary burden, the old excitement buoyed up in her again. The possibility of the girl

disappeared into the past. She'd better pull herself together. She picked up her bag, checked her watch, and ran.

On a normal day the activity in the streets so filled her eye that she hardly knew where to turn, torn whether to focus her camera on the intricate tableaux of open-air barbers on the sidewalk cutting their customers' hair, or tea vendors sweating over their fires and flame-blackened pots, or ink-haired boys selling everything from noodles to live chickens to cigarettes, or old men with whisk beards as peaceful as Buddhas playing their endless games of *co tuong*. And, too, there was the endless flotsam and jetsam of the war: beggars and amputees thronging everyplace where foreigners were likely to drop money.

But today streets were vacant, the broken windows and smashed doors like gouged-out features of a face once familiar. The people gone, or rather hidden, the streets deformed by their absence.

Helen's Saigon had always been about selling—chickens, information, or lovely young women, it didn't matter. It had once been called the Pearl of the Orient, but by people who had not been there in a very long time. Saigon had never been Paris, but now it was a garrison town, unlovely, a stinking refugee shantytown filled with the angry, the betrayed, the dispossessed, but she had made it her home, and she couldn't bear that soon she would have to leave.

Closer to the center of town, there was activity. Gangs of looters ranged through the city like gusts of wind, citizens and defeated soldiers who now in their despair became outlaws, breaking into stores they had walked past every day for years, stores whose goods they coveted.

Helen hurried, sucking on the drop of blood at her fingertip, but couldn't help her excitement, stopping to look, framing the composition in her mind's eye: teenage boys, some in jeans, some in rags, breaking a plate-glass window; a crowd inside a ransacked grocery, gorging themselves on crates of guava and jackfruit; a young girl with pink juice running down her face and onto her white blouse. It had always fascinated her—what happens when things break down, what are the basic units of life?

Hours late. Helen walked faster, touching the letters in the top of her bag, letters that she had wasted the whole morning begging for, that undid the last bit of her foolishness, her wanting to stay for the handover. She hoped that Linh would have taken his antibiotic and morphine in her absence but guessed he had not. His little rebellion against her. He had forgiven her and forgiven her again, but now he was drawing a line.

At the central market, unable to stop herself, she held up the camera to her eye, shooting off a quick series—a group of men arguing, then carrying away sacks of polished rice, bolts of cloth, electric fans, transistor radios, televisions, tape players, wristwatches, and carton after carton of French cognac and American cigarettes. She was so broke she could have used a few of the watches herself to resell stateside.

Wind blew from the east, a tired, rancid breath carrying across the city the smells of rotting garbage and unburied corpses. The rumbling to the north might have been the prelude to a rainstorm, but the Saigonese knew it was the thunder of artillery, rockets, and mortar rounds from the approaching Communist armies. Her brain hot and buzzing, all she could think was, What will happen next?

The looters, figuring they would probably be dead within hours, were careless. They fought over goods in the stores, then minutes later dropped them in the street outside as they decided to go elsewhere for better stuff. Even the want-stricken poor seemed to realize: What good is a gold watch on a corpse?

Helen walked through the torn streets unharmed as if she weren't a foreigner, a woman; instead she moved through the city with the confidence of one who belonged. Ten years before, she had been dubbed Helen of Saigon by the men journalists. She had laughed, the only woman from home the men had seen in too long. But now she did belong to the ravaged city—her frame grown gaunt, her shoulders hunched from tiredness, the bone-sharp jawline that had lost the padded baby fat of pretty, her blue gaze dark and inward.

Ten years ago it had seemed the war would never end, and now all she could think was, More time, give us more time. She would continue till the end although she had lost faith in the power of pictures, because the work had become an end in itself, untethered to results or outcomes.

She stopped on Tu Do, the old Rue Catinat, shaken at the gaping hole of the French milliner's store. The one place that had always seemed impregnable, a fortress against the disasters that regularly fell upon the city, Annick guarding the doorway with her flyswatter in hand. But the doorway was deserted, the plate-glass window shattered. Inside, crushed boxes, flung drawers, but not until she turned and saw the two rush-bottomed chairs, empty and overturned, did she believe the ruin in front of her.

When life in Saigon grew particularly hard, Helen would go to the store, enjoying the company of Annick, the Parisian owner, her perfectly coifed dark blond hair, her penciled eyebrows and powdered cheeks, the seams of the silk stockings she insisted on wearing despite the heat. She had been the only female friend Helen had all these years.

At first Helen had not understood the Frenchwoman's talents, did not understand that the *expérience coloniale* made her a breed apart. Annick was an old hand at Indochina, having thrived in Saigon for two decades, coming as a young bride. When her husband died she had confounded her family in France by staying on alone.

The two women would retire to the corner café and drink espressos. Helen sat and endured Annick's scolding about neglecting her hair and skin when only hours before she had been out in the field, working under fire. Helen smiled as the Frenchwoman pressed on her jars of scented lotions, remedies so small and innocuous that they made Helen love her more. Had Annick finally gotten scared enough to leave everything behind and evacuate?

In the smashed display window, the red silk embroidered kimono Helen had been bargaining for was untouched, although the cheaper French handbags and shoes had been stolen. The Vietnamese always valued foreign goods over Asian ones. Helen hadn't worked a paying project in a while; her bank account was empty. Her last batch of freelance pictures had been returned a month ago with an apology: *Sad story, but same old story*. But that would be changing soon. The silk slid heavy and smooth between her fingers.

She had worn down Annick on the price, but the kimono was still extravagant. This was the game they played—haggling over the price of a piece

of clothing for months until finally Helen gave in and bought it. Annick refusing to sell the piece to anyone else. Feeling like a thief, Helen undraped it from the mannequin, making a mental note of the last price in piastres that they had negotiated; she would pay her when she saw her again. In Paris? New York? She couldn't imagine because Annick did not belong in any other place but Saigon.

The whole city was on guard. Even the children who usually clamored for treats were quiet and stood with their backs against the walls of buildings. Even they seemed to understand the Americans had lost in the worst possible way. The smallest ones sucked their fingers while their eyes followed Helen down the street. When her back was to them, she heard the soft clatter of pebbles thrown after her, falling short.

Helen picked her way back home using the less traveled streets and alleys, avoiding the larger thoroughfares such as Nguyen Hue, where trouble was likely. When she first came to Saigon, full of the country's history from books, it had struck her how little any of the Americans knew or cared about the country, how they traveled the same streets day after day—Nguyen Hue, Hai Ba Trung, Le Loi—with no idea that these were the names of Vietnamese war heroes who rose up against foreign invaders. That was the experience of Vietnam: things in plain view, their meaning visible only to the initiated.

The city had ballooned in size, overwhelmed by refugee slums, the small historical district with the charming colonial facades hiding miles and miles of tin sheds and cardboard shacks, threats of cholera and plague so frequent hotels swabbed the sidewalks in front with ammonia or burned incense, both remedies equally ineffectual. Garbage collection, always sporadic, had been done away with entirely the last few weeks. In some alleys Helen had to wade ankle-deep through a soupy refuse, banging a stick in front of her to scare away rats.

A dark scarf covered her hair so she would attract less attention, but now she also wore a black cotton smock over her T-shirt to hide her camera. Soldiers had beaten up a few reporters already. Paranoia running wild. A camera a magnet for anger. The South Vietnamese soldiers, especially, were bitter

against the press, blaming the constant articles on corruption for stopping their gravy train of American money. Not an exhibitionist people, they didn't want evidence of their looting, their faces splashed across world papers, ruining chances of promotion at home or immigration abroad. Helen pitied them as much as she feared them. They were mostly poor men who had been betrayed along with everyone else abandoned in Saigon. If one was rich or powerful, one was already gone. Only the losers of history remained.

At the alley that led to her building, Helen folded the kimono into her lap and bent down into the stall as she did most days. She lifted a camera and took a quick shot, already thinking in terms of mementos. "*Chao ba. Ba manh khoe khong?*" Hello, Grandmother Suong, how are you?

The old woman stirred her pot, barely looking up, poured a small cup of tea, and handed it to Helen. She felt deceived, tricked into loving this Westerner, this crazy one. People gossiped that she was a *ma*, a ghost, that that was why she was unable to go home. "Why waste film on such an ugly old woman?"

"Oh, I only take pictures of movie stars." Grandmother smiled, and Helen sipped her tea. "Read the leaves for me."

Grandmother studied the cup, shook her head, and threw the contents out. "Doesn't matter. You don't believe. These are old Vietnam beliefs."

"But if I did, what does it say?"

Grandmother studied her, wondering if the truth would turn her heart. "It's all blackness. No more luck."

Helen nodded. "It's good I don't believe, then, huh?"

The old woman shook her head, her face grim. Gossips said they saw the Westerner walking through the streets alone, hair blowing in the wind, eyes blind, talking to herself. Heard of her taking the pipe.

"What's wrong, Grandmother?" They had been friends since the time Helen was sick and too weak to come down for food. People walked over from other neighborhoods just to sit at these four low stools and eat *pho*, because Grandmother Suong's had the reputation as the best in Cholon. During Helen's illness, the old woman had closed her stall and climbed the long flight of stairs to bring her hot bowls of soup.

“The street says the soldiers will be here tomorrow. Whoever doesn’t hang a Communist or a Buddhist flag, the people in that house will be killed.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve heard those rumors—”

Grandmother gave her a hard look. “I don’t have a flag.”

Helen sipped tea in silence, watching the leaves floating through the liquid, imagined them settling into her doomed pattern again and again against the curved bottom of the cup. The future made her weary.

“The way it works, from what I know of what happened in Hue and Nha Trang, is that the women scouts come in before the soldiers. They go through the streets and hand out the flags. Then you hang them. Welcome the victors and sell them soup.”

The old woman nodded, the furrows in her face relaxing as if an iron had passed over a piece of wrinkled cloth. “They season very differently in Hanoi than we do.” She rapped her knuckles lightly on the back of Helen’s hand. “Listen to my words. They are killing the Americans, even the ones without guns and uniforms. Their soldiers and our own. All the Americans leave, but you stay.”

Helen shook her head as if she could dislodge an annoying thought. “Linh is hungry.”

“I took him soup hours ago. You are too late. War is men’s disease.”

Helen finished her tea and set the cup on the crate that served as table. The old woman filled a large bowl with soup and handed it to her as she stood up. “You eat to stay strong.”

“Did you read for Linh?”

The old woman’s face spread into a smile. “Of course. He pretends he doesn’t believe. That he is too Western for such notions. For him there is only light and long life. Fate doesn’t care if he believes or not.”

Helen dropped lime and chilies in her soup.

“*Da, cam on ba.* Thank you. I’ll bring the bowl back in the morning.”

“Smash it. I won’t be open again after today.”

“Why, Mother?”

“*Chao chi. Toi di.* I’m going to the other side of town so maybe they forget who I am. Not only Americans but ones who worked for Americans are in danger. No one is safe. Not even the ones who sold them soup.”

Helen stood in the stairwell, a cold, tight weight in her chest making it hard to breathe. She was afraid. Not so afraid of death—that fear had been taken from her years ago—but of leaving, having failed. Time to go home, and the thing that had eluded her escaped. Always it had felt just around the corner, always tomorrow, but now there would be no more tomorrows. Grandmother's words of doom had spooked her. *More time, give us more time.*

Her reputation had waxed and waned with the course of the war. Never a household name synonymous with Vietnam the way Bourke-White and Higgins were in their wars. Or the way Darrow had been. At thirty-two already middle-aged in a young man's profession, but there was nothing else she was prepared for but war. Her ambition in the larger world had faded until there was only her and the camera and the war. She knew this war better than anyone—had been one of the few to live in-country continuously, out in the field, taking every risk. She wanted to stay for the end, cover the biggest story of her career, especially now since the news services and the embassy were insisting that all Americans leave. The holy grail, an exclusive that would fill both her depleted reputation and her bank account. But what if the promised bloodbath did happen? There was Linh. She would not endanger him.

Chuong, the boy who lived under the stairs, was again nowhere in sight. Helen paid him daily in food and piastres to guard the apartment and do errands. Mostly she paid him so the landlord would allow the boy to sleep in the stairwell, so Helen could be sure he ate. The small networks of connection falling apart. His absence was unusual, and Helen climbed the stairs, trying to ignore her sense of dread. *No one is safe. Not even the ones who sold them soup.* The old woman was usually accurate about the manic mood swings of the city. What if the city itself turned against her? Rumor swirled through the streets like burning ash, igniting whatever it settled on. She could still feel the bony rap of Grandmother's knuckles on her skin.

Inside her apartment, Helen put the bowl on the floor, slipped out of her shoes at the door, and set them next to Linh's. She threw off the smock,

pulled the neckband of her camera over her head, and laid the equipment on a chair. The camera was caked in dust. She would have to spend most of the evening cleaning the lenses and the viewfinder. The shutter was capping exposures, so she'd have to take it apart. A long, tedious evening when already she was dead tired.

She pulled off her T-shirt and pants, the clothing stiff with sweat and dirt. The laundry woman had stopped coming a week ago, so she would have to use a precious bottle of Woolite from the PX and wash her undergarments herself in the small basin in her bathroom. She tugged off the black scarf and shook out her hair, standing naked in the dim room for a moment, enjoying the feeling of coolness, the air touching her skin. Outside, she had to protect herself, had to become invisible. No hair, bared throat, absolutely no hint of cleavage or breasts, no hips or buttocks or bared calves were permissible. When she had first gone into the field, a veteran female reporter, happy to be on her way out, advised her to use an elastic bandage wrapped over her bra to flatten the outline of her breasts. Even in the cities it was advisable to wear pants with a sturdy belt, the woman said, because it was harder to rape a woman in pants.

It had all come down to this. Losing the war and going home. Her heart beat hard and fast, a rounding thump of protest. Would she go home, missing what she had come for?

Helen picked up the kimono and quickly slipped it on. In the darkened mirror, she tried to see the effect of the robe without looking herself in the face. The war had made her old and ugly, much too late for any of Annick's lotions to make a difference. She pulled a comb through her hair and started to take out the hoop earrings in her ears but decided against it.

"Is that you?" Linh called.

She heard both the petulance in his voice and his effort to conceal it. "I'm coming." Tying the sash of her kimono, she went to a cabinet for a spoon and picked up the bowl of soup.

In the bedroom doorway, she stood with a grinning smile that felt false. Lying in bed, staring out the window, he did not turn his head. The soft purple dusk blurred the outline of the flamboyant tree that had just come into bloom. Impossible to capture on film the moment of dusk, the effect of shadow on shadow, the small moment before pure darkness came.

“I brought soup, but Grandmother said she already fed you.”

“I worried.”

She could tell despite his hidden face that his words were true, but what she didn't know was that since he had become housebound, he spent the hours while she was away imagining her whereabouts, visualizing dire scenarios. Each time he heard her walk through the door, he said a quick prayer of gratitude, as if torturing himself in this way saved her. Too close to the end to take such risks, and yet he was helpless to stop her.

“I was trying to get home, but things kept catching my attention.”

She came forward in the dim room and sat on the edge of the bed to eat. She bent over him and kissed him gently on the lips. No matter that they had been together years, always a feeling of formality when they first saw each other again, even if the separation had been only hours. It had something to do with the attention Linh paid to her, the fact that he never took anyone's return for granted. The feeling disappeared with his quick smile, the way he always reached out a hand to establish touch. He wore old pajama bottoms, stomach and chest swaddled in gauze that had a dull glow in the room.

He was unhappy, and she was the cause of his unhappiness, and yet she was perfectly willing to bull herself through the conversation as if the feelings underneath their words didn't exist. *Why did someone fall in love with you because you are one thing and then want you to be something else?*

“I had many things to do today, my love.”

“The old crone read my fortune. Always the same—plenty of luck and a big family.” The remark made to sting.

When Linh turned to look at her, she noticed how sharp his cheekbones were, how his eyes were unfocused by pain. She caressed the half-moon scar on his cheek with her fingers. Whenever she asked how he got it, he changed the subject.

“You didn't take your shots?” she said.

“Forgot.”

With his infection, unsafe even to be still in the country. When Linh reached out his hand, she saw a belt twisted around his wrist. “What happened?” She held his hand and unwound it, feeling the cold heaviness of the

flesh underneath, the welts left behind. She rubbed briskly, willing the disappointment from her face.

“I was just bored, fooling around. Eat your soup.”

She looked at him. But this wasn't the time to confront. Just shrug it off, move on. “I'll change the dressings and give you a shot. Then I'll front you a game of Oklahoma gin.” Linh was tall, slender, with the finely etched features of the warrior princes of Vietnamese legend, perfect until one's eyes traveled to the scar that formed a half moon on his cheek and the ribboned skin on the wrist that he couldn't leave alone, an ache. Both of them full of scars.

“Sit with me a minute. Tempting me with cards?” He fingered the sleeve of the kimono. “You couldn't resist?” Equally appalled and in love with the fact that she could think of a kimono while their world was about to be lost.

She buried her face in his neck for a moment. Her only rest anymore when her eyes were closed, the images stopped. His skin felt hot and damp against her cheek. Fever. “Annick is gone.” They were both still for a moment. “A day, two at the most. Then I'll achieve my goal—‘Last American Woman Reporter in Vietnam.’”

“We should leave now. While there is time.”

“Martin is still promising the city will never go,” she said. “There might be more time.” The American ambassador had lost a son in the war, and the end would force him, too, to face things he didn't want to face. Better anything than that. “You distracted me,” Helen said, jumping up and going through the room to her film bag. She fumbled inside it and held up a thick envelope. “Guess what this is?”

“Then we're ready. Let's go now.”

Linh swung his legs to the floor and sat doubled over, hands gripping the bed frame.

“Yes. Your ‘Get Out of Vietnam Free’ card. Now you have two letters, Gary's and the embassy's. Insurance. But I had to sit through a two-hour lunch listening to how the press are tools of Hanoi. No wonder we lost.” She stood at the side of the bed, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, shaking her arms, trying to release tension.

“And what did you reply?”

“That photographs can’t lie. I said, ‘Make sure Nguyen Pran Linh gets to America, and as a bonus, I’ll leave.’ The country is going to disappear, be hidden behind a wall, and then the real stuff will start. All they want to talk about is identity cards, jumbled paperwork. How they have five different names on file for you.”

“We need to leave now,” Linh repeated.

“Not a moment past ‘The temperature is 115 degrees and rising,’ and the playing of ‘White Christmas.’” This was the clumsy radio signal for the beginning of the evacuation. She ran her fingers over his forehead, trying to brush away furrows of fever.

Linh smiled. “Does it strike you as an obvious signal? I predict the whole of the NVA Army is bent over radios waiting for it. A great cheer will go up.”

“Soon.”

“If you want to stay, we’ll stay.” He touched her hand. “You’re shaking.”

“Tired.”

He understood that this was an untruth, that she was afraid and running, and if he made the wrong move he would lose her. “Lie down.”

“First things first.” She readied the needle, gave him the injection.

Reluctant, knowing she had hours of camera repair work, she stretched out against him, shivering despite the heat.

After Linh had fallen into a drugged sleep, she got up and counted the ampoules of antibiotic and morphine left. A day’s supply, bought at triple the normal going rate on the black market. But there was no more bargaining. By next week, there wouldn’t be a black market for medicine at any cost.

Two days ago at the French hospital, the doctors had cleaned out Linh’s wound while he sat on a rough wood bench in the hallway, the rooms all filled to capacity, no drugs available. The doctor told Helen she was on her own finding penicillin and gave her a list of what would work in a pinch. The bullet had gone in at an angle and torn tissue on its way. The doctor left the young nurse with a needle and told her to suture him up. She was inexperienced, and the stitches were wide and irregular.

“Take him home if you want him to recover. We have no medicine, no food. They are abandoning patients,” she whispered.

Helen nodded, hired a cyclo on the street while two orderlies dressed in rags helped Linh out the door and down the stairs. His arms were outstretched, one on the shoulder of each man at his side, cruciform.

On a regular schedule, Helen swabbed out Linh’s wound, relieved that it had finally stopped draining. The skin was swollen and red around the bullet entrance and exit wounds. It had taken her a full day of scouring the city to get untampered-with antibiotic in sealed bottles. From her days in the field, she had learned the signs that things were starting to go bad—the pallor of the skin, the sticking sweat that didn’t dry. Linh was okay so far, although the fever troubled her. It was her fault he was wounded in the first place.

They had driven to the outskirts of the city to photograph what President Thieu was officially denying: that three million people had taken to the roads, refugees flooding into Saigon, that the South Vietnamese army was blocking entrance, trying to quarantine the city like a ship at sea. Thieu was blaming everyone else for his decision to abandon the Highlands. The mob scenes up the coast in Danang—airports overrun, people hanging on to the outsides of planes, weighing them down so they could not take off, women and children trampled—made everyone paranoid about the same disaster happening in Saigon.

From Martin down to her own contact at the embassy, the Americans were dazed by their impending loss and again forgot the Vietnamese. Negotiation was still considered an option, although the North Vietnamese made it clear they weren’t interested. Helen had been trying to sell pictures about the plight of the demoralized SVA, but Gary had told her bluntly that after ’73, when the American soldiers pulled out, Asian against Asian didn’t make the front page. The world was bored by the long, brutal, stupid war. Until a few months ago, there had been only a skeleton press in the whole country, but now reporters flooded in, waiting for the handover so they could write up the finale and fly back out.

Linh had been angry the last few months, angry at the government's ineptitude, and, Helen suspected, angry at America's coming betrayal. A fait accompli that the North had won, the least the government should do was facilitate a peaceful handover, avoid a panic where more of the population would be hurt. The government paid lip service to preserving peace and order even as the authorities scrambled like rats to abandon the city. Linh's usual gentle temper gone, he insisted on proving Thieu's lies. "Turning soldiers' guns against their own people."

The cab had dropped Linh and Helen blocks from the barricades, and they slowly walked through the alleys to come up behind the SVA soldiers, the last vestiges of the government's power, armed and facing a sea of refugees. Men, women, and children dying from lack of food and water, and many, having nothing to lose, tried to break through the blockades of concertina wire and bullets.

They had been warned that no one could help them if they got in trouble. Linh flaunted the danger, and Helen got caught up in his anger as well. She was taking pictures of the crowd when there was a surge of people to the left of them. A young soldier who looked no older than fifteen panicked and unloaded a clip from his automatic rifle into the crowd. The recoil shook him like a giant shaking him by the shoulders, and he turned sideways in his effort to hold on to the gun. A bullet ricocheted off the wall of a building.

Linh kept walking, stumbled, walked on. This is the way one survived. The mind shuts down. He kept walking, swatting at the smudge of blood that was growing on his shirt, walking on as if he would die walking.

"Linh!" Helen cried. She saw the blood and pulled him down on the sidewalk, lifted his shirt. The wound was at the side of his abdomen. She pressed her finger against the hole and could feel metal as he grimaced. Relief that it hadn't gone in deep. Helen used his shirt to bandage it. She rubbed her bloodied hand against her pants. Ironic, given all the times they had gone on far more dangerous runs, but Helen, now as superstitious as the Vietnamese, knew there was only a certain quantity of luck in each person's life, and they had remained past theirs.

Now Helen woke up on the apartment floor, her hand rubbing against her leg, shaken by yet another nightmare. She got to her feet, stiff, and walked to the map hanging on the wall. After all this time the idea of Vietnam was still as distant now as it had been to her as a young girl when her father studied maps of French Indochina. She barely recalled his face, confused if her memories were her own or pictures of him, but she did remember him letting her trace the outlines of countries with her fingertip, and from that gesture, she had felt the conqueror's feeling of possession. Now she had spent ten years in a country, South Vietnam, that had not existed on his maps, yet none of it was hers. Within a very short time—days, weeks, months?—it would disappear once more.

She had not imagined herself outliving this war. The country deep inside her idea of who she was; she would tear out a part of herself in leaving it. Darrow had seen to that. He said she would never survive the way she had been, and she changed, gladly. The girl she had been lost in the Annamese Cordillera, the untamed mountains that rose up behind the Central Highlands and folded themselves all the way back into Laos.

They had been out photographing a Special Forces reconnaissance mission when he woke her before dawn. The patrol was still out, and they watched the sun rise up out of the east and color the western mountains from a dull blackish purple to green. So many shades of green, Darrow said, that Vietnamese legend told that every shade of green in the world originated in this mountain range. The emerald backbone of the dragon from which the people of Vietnam sprang. Until then she had been blind, but when she saw those mountains, she slipped beneath the surface of the war and found the country.

Linh sighed in his sleep, and Helen laid a hand on the thin, strong muscle of his arm, willing away bad dreams. The way his dark eyes followed her the last few days made her nervous. As if he suspected her heart. Long ago

she had become more ambitious than feeling. She had fallen in love with images instead of living things. Except for Linh.

He moaned, and her nails cut red half-moons in her palm.

Her brother's death brought her to the war, but why had she stayed? Wanting an experience that wasn't supposed to be hers? Join a fraternity that her father and brother firmly shut her out of? What did all the pictures in the intervening years mean? The only thing in her power now was to save Linh. It angered her, his refusal to leave without her. An emotional blackmail. But she supposed that finally the last picture would get taken, even if it wasn't by her.

She picked up the camera and saw her face in the dusty lens, her features convexed. Was she to be trusted? She would kill for him, but would she also stay alive for him? An hour before dawn, her equipment clean and ready to go, her insides buzzed, a cocktail of lack of sleep and nerves. She fell asleep on the floor beside the bed.

They woke to the crumping sound of mortars on the edge of the city. She rose and was in motion, a prickling of adrenaline that she recognized when an operation was about to take place. Heating water for tea, swallowing a handful of amphetamines, she sponged herself off and packed a small carrying bag. Next to the door, she set down two battered black cases filled with film she had taken over the last week.

The last three years no one was much interested in pictures of a destroyed Vietnam. So Linh and she did humanitarian aid stories and began covering the ensuing crisis in Cambodia for extra money. Now Cambodia was off the list with the Khmer Rouge takeover. But when the actual fall of South Vietnam came, a photo essay recording the event would be very much in demand.

She had photographed the stacks of blackened corpses in Xuan Loc, had gone all over the city getting shots of the major players in the Saigon government, Thieu and returned Vice President Ky, who swore to stay and fight this time, while at their personal residences movers stacked valuable antiques—blue-and-white porcelain vases, peaceful gilded Buddhas, translucent coral and green jade statues carved into the shapes of fish and turtles—in the yard for shipment out of the country. And, of course, she had roll upon roll of the doomed people who had no special privilege, no ticket out. Looking at those

faces, she felt a premonition like a dull toothache. Maybe inside these two cases she had finally pinned it down. Maybe these two cases would redeem her part in the war.

She stood by the window drinking tea, looking at the overcast sky, roiling clouds in varying shades from light pewter to the muddy, brownish gray of scorched earth. The breeze had turned sharp, the smell of rain and thunder promising a strong monsoon shower. Saigon was loved precisely because it was so unlovable—its squalor, its biblical, Job-like misfortune, its imminent, hovering doom.

At the sound of a creaking bedspring, she turned and saw Linh awake.

“What are you thinking?” he said.

“Time to go to the airport. Our bags are here. Your papers are on top.”

“We agreed you would go to the docks, get shots of the boat evacuation. Then the airport.”

“Does one more shot matter?” She spoke so faintly he could hardly hear her.

“Either they all matter or none of them did.”

She nodded, unconvinced. “I have a bad feeling.”

“We have plenty of time.” He was reeling her back, gently, from wherever she had been.

Jittery, she moved over to the bed and unwrapped Linh’s dressings. Skin puffy and inflamed, hot to the touch. It puckered over the nurse’s crude stitches like yeasted dough. Helen bit down hard on her lip as she rewrapped him. A new hollowness around his eyes.

“Another shot of antibiotic even though it’s early,” she said. “I’ll be back by noon. Leave the radio on. Listen.”

Linh nodded but seemed distracted, and Helen feared he was getting worse. She helped him up to the bathroom and then back to bed. She would have to hire a cab or cyclo to move him. She placed a pot of tea and a cup in a chair next to the bed.

“I should skip Newport, and we’ll just get started.”

“Go,” Linh said. Then he began to sing: “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas. . . .”

She smiled, but her mind calculated potential problems each way. She assumed she could get out at any time but worried Linh was getting too weak. The trip would be hard on him until he reached a medical facility.

“Hurry,” he said. “Go have your final affair with Saigon. No regrets.”

She opened the refrigerator, the only one in the building, and filled the pockets of her smock with rolls of fresh film. At the door she pulled the neck strap of her camera over her head, then buttoned her smock.

She opened the door but stood, still undecided. “If I’m late, have Chuong help load everything on a cyclo and go ahead. I’ll meet you at the airport. Do you hear?”

He was silent, staring at the ceiling.

“Linh?”

“If you don’t return, I stay,” he said.

“Of course I’ll return.” The halfhearted ploy failed; he would not let her off so easily. “You just be ready.”

“You got it, Prom Queen.”

She pretended she had not heard him, banging the door shut and running down the splintering wood stairs that smelled of cedar and the sulfur of cooking fires. She was out into the street before she registered the continued absence of Chuong in the stairwell. That was what she had come to dread most, the continual disappearance of what she most relied on.

A cyclo stopped at a busy corner, and Helen jumped in before the driver could protest. After a wheedling argument, he grudgingly accepted three times the normal rate to go down to the Saigon River. People had decided to come out of hiding despite the twenty-four-hour curfew and the frequent pops of small-arms fire all around. A mile away from the port, the cyclo driver jumped off his seat and refused to go any farther. When Helen complained, he pointed a crooked finger to the solid wall of people. She got out, telling him she would pay double again his going fare if he waited an hour for her. Without a word, he calmly turned around and headed back downtown. Time more precious than money for once.

A rumor went through the crowd that two men had fallen into the water

and had been crushed between evacuation boats. The fetid air smelled of unwashed bodies and fear. As Helen stood deciding whether to risk plunging into the crowd and getting caught out for hours, she spotted Matt Tanner behind a concrete barricade with another photographer. In the false camaraderie of shared danger, she was happy to see him. He waved her over.

“Madhouse, huh?” Tanner was tall and slope-shouldered, with a narrow, wolfish face, and when he laughed, which was seldom, he showed a forbidding mouthful of jagged teeth.

“This is new blood, Matt Clark. We’re the two Matts.”

“It doesn’t look good,” she said.

“Are you staying on, too?” the new Matt asked. He was young, with white-blond hair in a ponytail and wearing a black T-shirt with astrology signs all over it. She didn’t like the vultures dropping in now and made no effort to hide it.

“Heading out this afternoon.” Watching the crowd, Helen rubbed her hand along the rough concrete of the barricade, which was already crumbling. Cheap, South Vietnamese government-contract stuff that had been undercut for profit so much that it was already disintegrating back into sand from the constant humidity. For what USAID had paid for it, it should have been stainless steel. She looked down and saw a smear of red. The jagged edge had reopened the cut on her finger.

Tanner pulled out a handkerchief and wound it around her finger. “No need to shed blood. This isn’t even your country.”

“I forgot.”

“The airport’s worse than this. ARVN shooting at the crowd. Especially Vietnamese with tickets out. Hurt feelings and all, huh?”

“I hadn’t heard that.” A mistake to come. The embassy had told her it would be at least a week if not longer before the real squeeze began. Wishful thinking.

“If I wanted my ass out I’d head for the embassy, *di di mau*, quick quick. My guess is that it’s today, and they’re not announcing to avoid a panic. The hard pull is on.”

Helen shook her head. She disliked the way he looked at her, the smugness of his smile. The press corps knew all one another’s secrets, like an extended,

dysfunctional family. Tanner used the long fingernail of his pinkie to scratch the inside of his ear.

“I meant to ring you up. Do you still have that Vietnamese working for you?”

“His name is Linh.”

“A couple of us are staying on for the changeover. Cocktails on the roof of the Caravelle to toast in the victors. Macho stuff. We need someone to translate.”

“He’s going out with me.” She looked Tanner in the eye, daring him.

He squinted back. “You two married?”

Everyone had suspicions but didn’t know. Helen shrugged.

“Then, honey, I’d get there yesterday fast.”

“Why are you staying?”

“Miss the biggest story in the world? You’re right. Crazy.” He looked out as the crowd swelled, then drew back. “To be frank, I’m thirty-five and haven’t won the Pulitzer yet. If I don’t come out of this place with it, it’ll be damn hard to win back in Des Moines. I’ll gamble being dead.”

Her desire was to stay, work her way down to the water as the bodies were fished out, record the faces desperate to leave, but she found Tanner’s reasoning so distasteful it made her decision clear. She bit the inside of her cheek as she put the lens cover on. The time she had banked on to get Linh to the airport was gone.

“Sorry you’re going to miss the party,” the new Matt said.

“Me, too.”

Tanner looked at her hard. “Take care of yourself. You know, you’ve paid your dues already, right?”

Helen made her way back toward downtown, fighting against the stream of evacuees. A rushing river of people, each intent on his or her private fate, blind to those around them. Even though Helen stood a full head taller than most of the Vietnamese, she had a hard time avoiding being pushed back toward the docks. Men and boys shoved with their arms and shoulders; a middle-aged woman knocked Helen hard in the shoulder with a cart loaded up with belongings. Did they really think they’d manage to escape with their lives, let alone with television sets and curio cabinets? But she un-

derstood the instinct—too hard to let go of what had been acquired with such difficulty.

What did she herself take? What did she have to show for ten years of devotion? A kimono, cameras, a few old photos of a life now gone?

Farther away from the docks, the pull of the traffic lessened. People eddied around her as if she were a rock in a stream. Her body ached, spent and tired. She tried to flag down a cyclo, but all had been commandeered by families to haul away household belongings. So she began the long walk home. It was only ten o'clock in the morning.

By the time she walked through her own building's door, she felt as if she had been up for days, not hours. It had taken her twice the usual time to retrace her way home. On the first step of the stairway, the boy, Chuong, stood, his eyes big at the sight of her. He was one of the few plump street children, actually bordering on fat, and Helen felt chagrined that it was her money that led to his overindulgence in food. His red-striped T-shirt pulled tight across his belly.

As she opened her mouth to speak, they both heard a loud thud overhead as if something heavy had been dropped. They looked at the ceiling, but there was no further noise.

"Where did you disappear to?" Helen asked. "You've been gone for days."

"Many important things. This morning soldiers come to building. Looking for good American things to steal. I tell them everything already stolen. Just old Vietnamese man dying upstairs. They go away."

"Good," Helen said, fear feathering along her back, a quick shiver. Just as likely Chuong had led them to the building in order to "liberate" her things. She no longer trusted the boy, and now it was simply a matter of figuring out how dangerous he was. "You did good."

The boy held his ground on the bottom step like a cranky landlord.

"Oh . . . I'll pay you now." Helen pulled out a thick roll of piastres, as soft and crinkled as tissue. As they lost value each day, it took more and more paper, small, tumbling stacks, to get anything done. "Here. This will buy as much as your old salary."

The boy looked at the bills in her extended hand, unimpressed, licked his index finger and smoothed his eyebrows. “Very bad soldiers. Kill anyone who lie to them.”

Helen took the rest of the bills out of her bag, paying out again as much. The piastres were almost all gone, but she figured they would be worthless to her soon anyway.

“Very good. You not number-one liar like other Americans.”

Helen did not bring up the delicate matter that she was paying him even though he had not been there for days. To save face, she should press him on the point, but she had lost her will. For his part, he showed none of the gratitude he had when she first helped him, years ago. Now she received only a smirk. Before she could ask him to commandeer a cyclo for them, Chuong jumped off the step and brushed past her, out the door.

Inside her apartment, the air was blue with the opulent scent of incense. Linh sat stiffly in a chair by the window. He never turned his head at her arrivals, and she always felt a small disappointment at this indifference.

“How’re you feeling?” she asked.

“Did you get your pictures?”

“Sure.” She put her arms around his neck. “I got them.” Instead of sweat and ointment, his skin smelled of soap. “Were you up?”

“Better. A shower and some packing.”

She knelt next to his chair and stared out at the flutter of red blossoms in the heavy, wet wind. The twisting gray branches bent under the corpulent flamboyant flowers, crowded so tightly not a hint of green leaf was visible.

“The rains are early this year,” Linh said. “The tree is blooming early.”

“The same time as last year. And the year before.”

“It seems early,” he said.

“I wish we could stay in this room and never leave it,” Helen said.

A gun lay on the floor next to the wall—the source of the sound she had heard in the stairwell. But she wouldn’t ask, just as Linh didn’t press if she got the boat evacuation shots. The usual delicate dance they did around the truth. Her truth was she longed to hide in this room, become invisible. As if the flimsy papered walls and thin door could save them. Out on the streets, without her camera, she felt vulnerable. No one knew of her panic attacks.

What internal price she paid for exposure. Preferable to be shot through a door or curtain and to have the source of death anonymous and to die in privacy and alone.

Helen went to the table and mechanically labeled the rolls of film she had taken the day before. Nothing extraordinary. Or rather the extraordinary had become ordinary. Linh had repacked the film cases much better than she. On top lay a folded white shirt, as perfect as in a store display. When she saw the hopefulness of the neatly creased folds, a fresh shirt to begin a new life, she had to turn away. And then it took over as if steel had entered her bones. Everything, including love and fear, squeezed out of her body, and all that was left was determination.

“Chuong told me about the soldiers,” she said.

“What soldiers?”

“They came in downstairs. He sent them away.”

“No soldiers came. I watched from the window since you left.”

Helen nodded, still surprised at her own naïveté. “Were you going to guard the apartment?” she asked, pointing her chin toward the weapon.

Linh studied the gun as if seeing it for the first time. “If they came, I planned to kill myself.”

Helen sucked in her breath. No matter how long she had been in Vietnam, she still took things lightly, like an American. Linh’s quick acceptance of the worst case reminded her that it was not as hard to be brave with the promise of helicopters waiting to whisk you to safety, to home.

“We’re going now.”

She gave Linh the last two shots of morphine, hoping it would last till the embassy and American doctors could give him more. She put on her smock, retied a scarf over her hair.

As she picked up the two cases, the corner of one gave out, spilling out film rolls. The cases were worn and battered, the cardboard corners turned mushy. Helen had patched them with electrical tape, the only thing that didn’t disintegrate in the humidity. “Just a minute,” she said, running to get more tape and wrap the corner.

“Why don’t you get a new case?” Linh’s face set in impatience. The case was just another example of her difficult ways, her willfulness that was putting

them both in danger. Yet he knew if he pushed at all, like a high-strung horse, she would balk.

“I know. I will,” Helen said, using a knife to cut the last tail of tape off. Like everything else, it had been provisional, meant only to last out her time there, but like everything else, the provisional had become permanent. Linh slung their tote over his good shoulder. She locked the thin wood door of the apartment, leaving the lamp with the red shade burning, and hurried down the stairs, but Linh took the steps slowly, stopping briefly on each landing. By the time she reached the stairwell, the journey before them had changed as in a fairy tale, grown difficult beyond imagining.

Outside, they plunged into a stream of people and were carried along. The ruttish noise deafening. Families argued over which direction to go, children cried, dogs barked, and on top of it all was the impatient blaring of horns as vehicles tried to force their way through. Far in the background, like the steady thrum of a heart, the sound of bombs exploding. The image of a bloodthirsty army approaching closer and closer made each person jog instead of walk, push instead of wait. Like a fix, Helen ached to pick up her camera and start shooting. What was the point of living through history if you didn't record it?

Linh walked steadily, but his limp was more pronounced with his weakness, and there was a pallor to his face, his skin wet with a sweat that didn't dry. Helen took a deep breath to keep her panic down, her mind calm. The biggest part of her job as a photographer to make the minute calculations between getting the picture and getting killed, a skill that she took refuge in, honed into instinct. Yet she had ignored her instincts, following the embassy's assurance that things would unravel slowly. Cutting that timeline in half had still been too lenient. Yesterday, when she had been told the city wouldn't be lost, that all Americans and dependents would get out in time, she should have run to the airport.

Down Tan Da, a street usually full of restaurants, metal bars were pulled across all the doors and windows.

Hard to walk close to the buildings because of the mounds of garbage, hard to walk in the street without being run down. Helen moved ahead of Linh, navigating the easiest path through the debris that littered the street.

Broken glass crunched underfoot. People dropped or abandoned things as they went. Clothes everywhere, plastic bags bulging with household goods, pieces of furniture and old rusted bicycles, a sewing machine and a frayed bedroll.

Helen guided him to the wall of a building, and Linh crouched, holding his side, and took deep breaths, huffing out air through his open mouth. She watched him suffer and hated herself more each minute.

“You okay?” she asked.

“More air.”

She felt his drenched shirt. “Give me the bag.”

“You already have the cases.”

“We’ll move faster.”

Linh nodded and handed her the tote.

The traffic stopped ahead, some kind of checkpoint. Helen helped Linh into a doorway of a building and left the bags with him.

Five minutes later, she came back, her face stern as she grabbed the bags. Linh noticed her hands trembling. “Come on, let’s turn around. Some ARVN colonel types are trying to catch deserters. Executing them on the spot. I don’t want them getting hold of your papers.”

They retraced a block and headed down a side street off An Dong Market. Along the sides of the road, more and more old people squatted on the ground, their faces closed down with despair. Children shivered at street corners despite the heat, eyes blinking hard and hands holding tight to whatever toys or clothes they carried, separated from their families. Almost a Danang. It always seemed to come to this moment in a war when the strong fought to survive and the weak fell. Civilization a convenience for peacetime.

Inside her head, a clock ticked off the minutes they were losing. Her shoulders already hurt from the weight of the film cases. Everyone knew Ambassador Martin was delusional, hiding in the embassy, afraid to call it quits. But Helen had calculated that when the hard pull finally came, the U.S. military wouldn’t dare leave until every American and all the related Vietnamese staff were taken out. They could never afford that kind of bad publicity. Days if not weeks of flights. Not like the British embassy that flatly abandoned its Vietnamese staff. Impossible to anticipate the breakdown of

the city within hours, having to make it all the way on foot, with bags and a weakening Linh. It wasn't supposed to fall apart like this.

Two blocks over from An Dong they turned up another street parallel to the checkpoint, weaving back and forth through alleys to avoid soldiers, wasting precious energy. Helen got lost and left Linh several times while she rechecked major street names. Halfway up Tran Hung Dao, at the front of a loose crowd of people, gunfire sounded behind them. The crowd panicked, trampling those in front, and Helen was shoved hard against her back, knocking her down on her hands and knees. She reached for Linh, and together they scrambled to the sidewalk, pressing themselves behind an overflowing garbage bin. Linh sat on the sodden ground, chest heaving.

Helen moved to the front of the trash bin and looked back south to the head of the street. There were about ten men, drunk and swigging from liquor bottles. Dressed half in uniform, half in civilian clothes, unclear if they were ARVN trying to melt into the civilian crowd or the local *coi boi*, cowboys, thugs, masquerading as soldiers in order to loot with less interference. They fired into the crowd and laughed as they watched people trample over one another in their desperation to flee.

One of them was dressed in a satin shirt that hung down over camouflage pants with army boots. He pointed a rifle at a group of women cowering on the opposite side of the street from the garbage bin. The men surrounded the girls, pulled one away from the rest and pushed her into the deep alcove of a doorway.

Helen looked up and down the street, hoping for some diversion to rescue the woman. Nothing she could do without getting herself and Linh killed. The always present "white mice," city police, usually on every corner, now nonexistent.

Her only means taking out her camera, ready to shoot.

An older woman from the group, a mother or aunt, screamed and ran forward toward the alcove, and one of the soldiers shot her. Captured on film. The curse of photojournalism in a war was that a good picture necessitated the subject getting hurt or killed. Helen blinked, tamped emotion.

The men gathered the rest of the women together, guns trained on them, probably planning to execute all witnesses. A frame. The girl from the alcove

ran back into the group, face bloodied, pants torn. A frame. One of the men with an angry blade of a face. Frame. He jerked his head around, making sure no one saw what they would do next, and then his eyes locked on Helen across the street. A frame. And another.

“*Dung lai!* Stop!” he shouted, and the men abandoned the women and ran across the street with their guns aimed. The women, forgotten, clambered away.

Helen stood up. “*Bao chi.* Press. The press is to have protection.”

Everything went black. When she came to again, she was flat on the ground, the rough surface of the street like nails in her back, her face covered in a warm liquid that turned out to be her own blood. The one who had rifle-butted her in the head screamed and pointed to the camera with his gun, but he seemed far away, everything seemed very far away, and Helen separated from herself, detached, amused by the absurdity of his shooting a camera. Didn't he realize there were always other cameras? Her only thought that these men must be soldiers because normal street thugs wouldn't care about pictures. Another soldier, his face round and childlike, with a sprinkling of acne across the cheeks, came and held the point of his rifle so close to her temple she could feel the heat from the muzzle, could tell it was the one used on the dead woman across the street.

Time unraveled. Had she passed out again? She finally found it, a sense of peace after all these years; for whatever reason, she was unafraid, and wasn't that something remarkable for a poor little scared girl from California? Maybe it was no worse than closing a book. But then everything tunneled again to the present. Again, she was on the street and sick to her stomach. The asphalt under her head, tar from the street, garbage, and the acrid smoke of a fired gun, although she no longer remembered one firing, and she felt a childish fear that she would die in a foreign place.

The Vietnamese believed the worst way to die was far from home, that one's soul traveled the earth lost forever, but this place was as much her home as California, she had lived out some of the most important moments of her life here, and if that didn't qualify a place as home, what did? She knew retired military men who had come back to live in Vietnam, married Vietnamese women, and fathered children, with no intention of ever leaving,

who still considered Ohio home. That was wrong. California was infinitely far away. California was gone. Even her dreams were shaped by this land—rice paddies stretched flat to the horizon, mountains and jungles, fields of green rice shoots and golden rice harvests like rippling fields of wheat, lead curtains of monsoon rain, bald gaunt hides of water buffalo, and, too, Saigon's clotted alleyways, the destroyed tree-lined avenues, the bombed-out, flaking, pastel villas, even their small crooked apartment with the peacocks and Buddhas painted on the door. The battered, loving, treacherous people. Her heart's center, Linh. An undeniable rightness in ending here.

A blinding flash of white, an explosion, and when she looked up at the soldier with the child's face, he was gone, or rather partly gone, half his head and neck scooped away, and then he toppled, bouncing up off the pavement an inch before settling back down to the earth. The thugs were silent, suddenly sobered, a pack of feral dogs, and with the capriciousness of the violent, one by one they turned and jogged away.

Helen pulled herself up and turned her head, a tendril of pain curling up her neck, and saw Linh sitting braced against the wall, legs tucked against his chest, the gun from their apartment balanced on his knees. What toll had been exacted from him in saving her over and over again? A roll of the dice. Helen knew the soldiers could have just as easily decided to shoot them.

Her last bit of shiny luck used up, now there would be only the rattle of her empty bag with each step.

The women returned and surrounded their shot friend. Taking her remaining camera out of one of the cases, Helen went over and crouched, taking pictures of the outstretched woman. Staring up at the lens, eyes dark and empty, hiding a secret. One of the women moved a hand in front of her. Without thought, Helen batted it out of the way. Risking her own and Linh's life, she'd earned this one and took the shot. Her due. The women enclosed their friend. After a moment, a wail.

Now Linh struggled to get up on his feet; no protest when Helen lifted the two black cases and their tote. They ran.

After a block, they slowed down to a walk, and after another few blocks

they both stopped to catch their breath. They hobbled. A small spot of blood spread on his shirt.

“I need water,” he gasped. They searched the surrounding storefronts in growing desperation, and in that panic, that low point, she heard the beating of helicopter wings, as beautiful as a piece of music, and she craned her neck to see over the buildings. The sound was still far off. She smashed the glass door of a restaurant, went to the bar, picked up a glass from a neat row of them turned upside down, and filled it with water from a clay cistern on the counter.

The spot of blood had doubled in size. She pulled out a clean T-shirt from her bag. “Hold this against it.” When he finished the glass, he quickly turned away and retched. She picked up the film cases again but left the tote behind, unable to bear the weight on her shoulders and neck any longer.

They walked, this time more slowly, so slowly that any of the old people along the streets could have kept up.

Her head throbbed from the rifle butt, and she fingered a crust of dried blood in her hairline. Should she discard the two black cases to keep moving on? But it was as if she were abandoning each person captured on a frame of film. She remembered one shot in particular, a baby that had been trampled by the crowds of refugees on the outskirts of town. The guards had set up barriers right next to the body without touching it. He lay on his side like a small animal curled up in leaves in a forest. Myriad stories like this. This human being already gone, except as a dark spot on a lighter background of negative. If the print were published, the child would achieve some kind of immortality, however flimsy. Each of those kinds of pictures diminished the taker.

Helen hefted the straps higher on each shoulder, skin rubbed raw, and kept walking.

Linh held an arm across his stomach and picked up a walking stick lying in the street.

“Put your hand on my shoulder,” she said.

They walked down the center of main thoroughfares now, incapable of taking the more roundabout route of small streets and alleys. Luckily, hardly a vehicle was on the road anymore. If soldiers or *coi bois* came upon them now, they would be unable to run away. The traffic thinned even more as they approached the residential section where the American embassy was located.

Here the streets appeared deserted, and she felt cheered that the hardest part of the ordeal was nearly over.

Linh collapsed against the trunk of a large tamarind tree. The neighborhood was old here; the branches arched over the streets in an umbrella of shade. Many of the trees on other streets had been chopped down to make room for tanks. A pair of helicopters came in, and Helen saw them clearly now down to the runners, heard the throbbing of one as it hovered over the embassy grounds, waiting for the first to land.

“We’re close now,” she said and squeezed his hand.

He leaned against the tree, holding on to it to stay upright, his face as wet as if he had just doused it with water. The blood spot on his shirt was as large as an outstretched hand. He gave her a stiff nod.

“We can’t stop again,” Helen said. “Next stop is inside.”

This was as bad as her worst patrols, each step an act of will, the urge to lie down overwhelming.

A block away from the embassy, a new noise joined the cacophony of helicopters and distant artillery. A silky, rustling sound, constant yet changing like the rolling of the ocean. Helen and Linh turned the last corner and came to a standstill.

A sea of bodies spread before them, not an inch of ground empty, bodies limited only by the buildings they were crushed against, from the front of embassy gates to the other side of the boulevard. Not a static, passive crowd, but a turbulent ocean of people eddying around motorcycles and islands of stacked suitcases, people surging and dashing themselves up against the solid metal gates of the embassy front like waves crashing against the rocks of a forbidding coast, breaking and falling back onto themselves.

Helen stood, numbed by the sight of Americans locking themselves away, fleeing. She glanced at Linh, who barely registered the turmoil around him. If he lost consciousness, it would be over for both of them.

“Give me the gun,” she said.

Too weak to argue, he handed it off to her. If anyone used it, it would have to be her. Helen took off the safety and placed her index finger on the trigger. In all her years in-country, she had never carried a weapon, had refused to make a decision to defend herself. Yet Linh had just killed to save her.

Shouldering her way into the back of the throng, moving toward the side entrance, her fingers firmly locked around Linh's wrist, she figured even if they made it inside, the film cases would have to be sacrificed at some point along the way. But not without a fight.

The first people who felt the pressure of her pushing turned with angry glances but shrank away once they saw her.

She looked down to her blood-covered smock, realizing it wasn't her own blood but the child-faced soldier's. Her stomach flopped. She wanted to rip the smock off, but there was hardly room to lift her arms. If she released her grip on Linh, he might go down under the feet of the crowd. So she let go her grip on the gun, dropping it into her smock's pocket, and reached up and pulled the black scarf off her head. She wiped dried blood off her face, wiped the smock, then let go of the scarf and watched it suspended between the bodies of people before it disappeared from sight as if in quicksand.

In the hot wind her hair blew, and the faces around her registered the fact that she was an American, or at the very least a Westerner, and more compelling than resentment was their realization that staying close might be a ticket out. "Make way for the dying American, make room for the dying American." And so Helen and Linh were surrounded and nudged through the crowd, and after two hours they were pressed into the grillwork of the side gate.

She felt delivered, grateful for the Marines with their crew cuts and black-framed glasses, elated at the sight of their uniforms and reassured by the M16s across their chests that rendered her own attempt at self-protection ridiculous. Almost delirious, head throbbing, legs like paper, she realized that she was still on the wrong side of the gate, the guards so overwhelmed they didn't see her.

All around her voices were raised to the highest pitch—pleading, Vietnamese words falling on deaf ears, begging in pidgin English for rescue. People bargaining, trying to bribe at this too-late hour with jewelry and gold watches and dirty piastres pushed through the bars of the gate, valuables flung inside in this country where wealth was so scarce.

A man close to Helen held out a baby. "Not me. Take my baby. Save my son." He would pay one million piastres, two million, and as he met silence

on the other side of the gate, he cried and said five million, five million piastres, money that he had either amassed over decades or stolen in minutes. He opened a sack and shoved bundles of the bills through the gate to obligate his son's protectors, unaware that to these Americans his money was worthless, less than Monopoly money, that these soldiers were scared of this dark-faced mob, unable to grant safety even to one baby, that all they wanted was to protect the people already inside and escape from this sad joke of a war themselves.

Helen's arm jerked down as Linh collapsed behind her, his legs buckled, and she screamed in Vietnamese, forgetting, languages blurring, then realizing her mistake, screaming in English, "Let us in. I'm American press."

The Marine's head turned at the sound of her words. "Jesus, what's happened to you?"

"Let us in."

"Open the gate," he said, motioning to the guards behind him.

As the gate opened, more Marines came to provide backup, aiming automatic rifles into the crowd.

The guard put a hand against Linh's chest. "He can't come."

"He works for the American newswires. He's got papers."

"Too late for papers," he said. "Half the people out here have papers."

"Damn you," Helen screamed. "This man was just wounded saving my life."

"Can't do it."

"He's my husband."

"I suppose you have a marriage certificate?"

"He stays, I stay. And if I get killed by the NVA, the story of the embassy refusing us will be in every damned paper. Including your name."

The guard's face was covered in sweat, already too young and tired and irritable for his years. "Shit, it doesn't hardly matter anymore. Get in." He came out a few more steps, grabbed Linh, then Helen, and flung them inside like dolls. The man with the baby tried to grab Helen's arm, but the Marine punched him back into the net of the crowd. As they passed through the gates, five or six Vietnamese used the chaos to rush in. They scattered into the crowd, invisible like birds in a forest, before the guards could catch

them. Guns fired, and Helen hoped they had been fired into the air. No more blood on her hands this day. With a great metallic clang, the gate shut again.

The lost opportunity frenzied the crowd outside. Heads poked over while Marines stood atop the walls, rifle-butting bodies off.

Inside was crowded but calmer. Americans stood by the compound buildings while Vietnamese squatted on every available inch of grass.

They were searched and patted down. "Ma'am, you'll have to turn that in."

Helen looked at the guard bewildered until she realized they had found the forgotten gun in her smock. Not only that, but she had managed somehow to keep both film cases. The guard led her over to the compound swimming pool, where she tossed it in to join the fifty or sixty guns already lying along the bottom.

"I need a medic," Helen said.

The guard nodded and went off. Helen grabbed Linh's shoulders and supported his weight as he lowered himself and stretched out on the ground. The front of his shirt was soaked in blood. Several minutes later an American in white shirtsleeves came over with a black kit. "You hurt, miss?"

"Not me. Linh was wounded a couple of days ago. He's bleeding."

The man helped unbutton Linh's shirt and unwrapped the bandages. "I can clean him up, but he needs attention from doctors on ship."

"How long before we go?" Helen said.

"They'll call you."

Helen nodded.

"How about I look at that bump on your head? Looks like you might need some stitches yourself. Don't want a scar."

Hours passed. Helen and Linh sat on the grass, propped against the film cases. Papers were being burned inside the compound buildings, the endless secrets of the war, smoke and ash drifting in the air, settling on the people, the ground, on top of the water in the pool like a gray snowfall. After the adrenaline wore off, Helen was bone-weary. She nibbled on a few uppers, then brought warm sodas and stale sandwiches from the makeshift food service operating out of the abandoned embassy restaurant.

“We made it,” she said. “Happy, happy.”

“Still in Saigon. We just managed to crawl into a new cage.” Linh held his side, his face drowsy with dull pain.

Helen leaned in close to him. “I pushed it too far, but it all worked out. No damage done.”

“No damage.”

“When I took the picture of that woman, I was angry that the shot might get ruined. And then I thought, What have I become?”

Linh shifted and grimaced at the pain. “Just be with me.”

“I want to.”

“You didn’t start this war, and you didn’t end it. Nothing that happened in between is your fault, either.”

Helen’s face was expressionless, tears running down it, without emotion.

“You don’t believe me.” He wiped her face dry, but already her attention was slipping away. “None of it had anything to do with us. We’re just bystanders to history.”

The sky darkened. Linh’s head rolled to one side as he fell into a deep, drugged sleep. People near Helen worried about the Marines being able to keep back the crowd outside. The Vietnamese going out were classified as dependents of the Americans, although for the last decade the Americans had depended on them to survive in this harsh country. Traitors by association. The number of people per flight was minuscule compared to those waiting, like taking water out of a bucket an eyedropperful at a time.

The noise from the helicopters was deafening, but in between Helen could hear the distant rumblings from Gia Dinh and Tan Son Nhut, a constant percussion that matched the throbbing in her head. The noise much closer than this morning; lifetimes seemed to have passed in the intervening hours. Linh trembled in his sleep.

An embassy employee walked by, and Helen stopped the man. “How much longer? This man needs medical attention.”

“Could be all night.” He looked at her sternly, tapping his pencil on his

notepad for emphasis. “Americans are being boarded now. Especially women. Go inside. He’ll be taken care of later.”

In the convoluted language of the embassy, trouble. She woke Linh, tugging him onto his feet, harnessing the straps of the film cases around her neck. They joined the end of a long line going up the stairs to the roof. She flagged one of the Marines guarding the entrance. “I need to get this man on a helicopter.”

“Everyone takes their turn.”

She rubbed her forehead. “No. He’s been shot. He’s going to die without medical attention.”

“There are a lot of people anxious to get on the plane, ma’am. I don’t have any special orders concerning him.”

A rumped-up man with a clipboard came up. He was in his twenties, with a beaten-up face that looked like he hadn’t slept in a week.

“I’m Helen Adams. *Life* staff photographer. This is Nguyen Pran Linh, who works for *Life* and the *Times*. He’s wounded and needs immediate evacuation.” Helen figured under the current circumstances no one would find out about her lies, the fact her magazine had pulled her credentials. Weren’t they trying to kick her out of the country, after all?

He scribbled something on his clipboard. “Absolutely.” He scratched his head and turned to the Marine. “Medical evac. Get someone to escort them to the front of the line. And get someone else to explain why to everyone they’re bumping in front of. Tell ’em he’s a defector or something.”

“You’re the first person today who’s actually done what he said,” Helen said.

“I’m a big fan of yours, Ms. Adams.”

“I didn’t know I had any.”

“You covered my older brother. He was a Marine in ’sixty-eight. Turner. Stationed in I Corps.”

“Did he—”

“Back home running a garage in Reno. Three kids. The picture you took of him and his buddies on the wall. He talked about meeting you. I’ve been following your work since.”

“Thank you for this. Good luck,” she said.

“We’re going to need a whole lot more than luck.”

One Marine carried the film cases and another half-carried Linh up the jammed staircase. They went through a thick metal door and more stairs, waited, then climbed up a flimsy metal ladder staircase and were on the roof. The air filled with the smells of exhaust and things burning, a spooky campfire. To the north and west, Helen saw the reddish glow of hundreds of fires and the few streaks of friendly red tracers going out against the flood of blue enemy tracers coming in. The odds visibly against them. The throbbing of her head had become a constant buzz, but she didn’t want to take anything, wanted her mind to keep clear.

The helicopter jerked down onto the roof, landing like a thread through the eye of a needle, and her body went rigid. The beating rotors and the screaming of the engine so loud, the Marines shouting unintelligible boarding instructions that she didn’t have time to explain to Linh. His eyes fluttered half-closed. A young man from one of the wires stood next to them, going out on the same flight.

The Marines signaled their group to move out, and they crouched and ran under the hot rotor wind. At the helicopter door, Helen grabbed the young newsman’s arm.

“Get these to someone from *Life* on board the ship.”

“Sure. But why?”

“I’m going out on a later flight.” Until the words fell out of her mouth, she hadn’t accepted that she had made room for this possibility.

The Marine started heaving the film bags on, the tape coming loose and hanging off like party streamers. “Hurry up, people. Ma’am, get on.”

Helen backed away. Her stomach heaved, sick in soul.

“Look after him,” she yelled to the stranger. “His name is Nguyen Pran Linh. He works for *Life*. Get him a doctor immediately.”

Linh looked up confused, not comprehending Helen wasn’t boarding. When he did, he struggled back out of the helicopter. “You can’t—”

“Stop him!” Helen screamed, backing away, blood pounding in her ears,

sick that she was capable of betraying again. The Marine and the young man forced Linh back inside and buckled him in. She watched as, weak as a child, he was strapped into the webbing, saw his head slump to the side, and was relieved he had passed out. She ran to the helicopter, crouched inside, begged a pen and scribbled a quick few lines on paper. She put his papers and the note inside a plastic bag, tied it with a string around his neck, the same way she had handled the personal effects of countless soldiers.

In front of the waiting men, Helen bent and put her lips to Linh's forehead and closed her eyes. "Forgive me. *Em ye'u anh*. I love you."

Back out on the landing pad, the wind whipped her hair and dug grit into her skin, but the pain came as a relief.

The Marine stood next to her. "Get on the next helicopter out. Everyone here is not going to leave."

"What about them?" she said, shrugging her shoulder at the great filled lawn below.

"Better a live dog than a dead lion. And they eat dogs in 'Nam."

The helicopter's door closed, and the Marine crouched and guided Helen back to the doorway, and he shook his head as she made her way back down the stairs.

Helen stood on the lawn and watched the dark bulk of the machine hover in midair for a moment, the red lights on its side its only indicator. Because of the danger of being fired on, the pilots took off in the dark and used projector lights on the roof only for the last fifteen feet or so of the landings.

A mistake, she thought to herself, a mistake not to be on that helicopter. Wrong, wrong, wrong. Her insides tingling electric as if there were bubbles running through her blood.

As much as she had prepared herself for this moment, she was at a loss. What was she looking for? What did she think she could accomplish? If she had not found it yet, what were the chances that a few more days would change that? She had always assumed that her life would end inside the war, that the war itself would be her eternal present, as it was for Darrow and for her brother. The possibility of time going on, her memories growing dim, the photographs of the battles turning from life into history terrified her.

Blood had been shed by one side; blood had been shed by the other. What did it mean?

The helicopter swayed and the nose dipped, a bubble of shuddering metal and glass, and then it glided off across the nearby tops of buildings. Safe. Tiny and fragile as an insect in the night sky. Helen felt bereft, betraying Linh, and all she could hope for was the cushion of delirium before he realized what she had done.

The Vietnamese on the grounds of the compound grumbled about the length of the wait, complaining that the Americans were not telling them anything but “It’ll be okay. You’ll be taken care of.” When they protested their thirst, the Marines directed them to the pool. The sight of Helen standing outside on the grass reassured those close-by—obviously the evacuation wasn’t over until every American, especially a woman, was gone.

Helen dreaded a repeat of the mob scene outside, the potential for it to turn violent, and made her way to one of the outer concrete walls of the compound and lay down on the cool, dead grass under a tree. The roaring grew quieter and quieter, the calming outside conflating with her state inside, until she almost felt herself again. In the middle of chaos, she slipped into a deep sleep and woke up to rusty clouds of smoke passing the faint stars and moon.

She took her camera, attached a flash, and began taking pictures. The Vietnamese watching her grew visibly disgruntled. A journalist wasn’t a real American; everyone knew they were crazy.

In the early hours of the morning, when many of the evacuees had fallen into a disjointed sleep, Helen noted a thinning in the ranks of Marines on the grounds of the compound.

An hour before dawn, the last perimeter guards withdrew, and as Helen followed, taking pictures, the barricade slammed down and was bolted—a final rude barking of metal—locking her and everyone else out. The first to notice the lack of guards were the people still outside the embassy, who had never gone to sleep, who remained frantic and now tore at the gates. The people inside the compound heard the roar and rushed the building only to find tear gas and a steel wall between them and escape.

Canned dreams and cynical promises crushed underfoot like bits of paper.

The outside gates were scaled and burst open from the inside as the last helicopters loaded on the roof. People poured in, flooding the compound in a swell of rage. Helen took a picture of a Vietnamese soldier aiming his machine gun at the disappearing helicopters, pulling the trigger, tears running down his face. Bullets sprayed the night air now tinged by dawn to the east. Understanding that their chance was gone, the crowd destroyed and looted. Helen watched a small Vietnamese woman haul a huge desk chair upside down on her head out the compound driveway. A man left with a crate of bagged potato chips.

A shabbier conclusion than even Darrow had foretold.

Now she walked through the same gates unopposed, ignored, made her way home down the deserted streets as if in a dream. Too incredible that the whole thing was finally over. Rumors were that the NVA would arrest any Western journalists and shoot them on the spot, the “bloodbath” that the Americans warned of, but she figured the reality would fall something short of that.

She came alone to the moon-shaped entrance of the alley, puddled from rain, then entered the narrow, dark throat of the cobbled path. At her crooked building, she looked up and saw her window lit, the red glow of the lampshade, and her heart, not obeying, quickened. Their old signal when Darrow had come in from being in the field. Except that he had been dead seven years now. With Linh gone, time collapsed, and it felt strangely like the start of the story and not the end. Exhausted, Darrow would be sleeping in their bed, damp from a shower, and she would enter the apartment and go to him.

She reached the lacquered Buddha door and found the brittle wood crushed in at knee level as if someone had kicked it hard with a boot. After all this time to finally be broken now. No one bothered stealing from this building. She wondered if Chuong had done it in spite after they had left. She ran her fingers over the worn surface, now splintered, touching the peacocks and the lotus blossoms that signified prosperity and long life and wisdom. She looked at the various poses of the Buddha in his enlightenment. Saigon in

utter darkness this last night of the war. A gestating monster. Her letter to Linh had been simple: *I love you more than life, but I had to see the end.*

This was the way one lost one's homeland. The first things lost were the sights, then the smells. Touch disappeared, and, of course, taste was quick to follow. Even the sounds of one's own language, in a foreign place, evoked only nostalgia. Linh had no memory of the final helicopter flight over Saigon. No feeling of this being the end of his war. When he tried to recall anything, he saw, or rather felt, the beating of the rotors overhead in slow motion, like the pulsing of the wings of a great bird. A heartbeat. Darkness, then blinding light, then darkness. A strong mechanical wind that drove small bits of stone and dirt into his skin as he was pushed into the belly of the bird. Her broken face.

There was the familiar lifting of the helicopter, stomach dropping into feet, but for the first time he didn't feel his inside righting itself after gaining altitude. He feared he might be dying, afraid that in lifting off from the embassy roof, his soul had dropped away. The images of his family, mother and father, brothers and sisters, Mai, Darrow and all the countless others, all passed before his eyes. And Helen had slipped between his fingers at the last minute, lost. Idly he wondered as he flew through the night if it might not be better to die right then.

The American ship rose and fell with the waves, but despite his fever, Linh held on to the railing. After the doctors had bandaged him up, he slowly made his way on deck. The sick room reminded him of a coffin. The medication they had given him made him faint-headed, but he had to see the sky, breathe the air.

He squinted to see the last of the dim landmass like the humped back of a submerged dragon through the hazy air, but the ship had already begun the long journey to the Philippines. He could not tell if it was the shadowy form of land on the horizon or merely the false vapor of clouds.

Superstition held that if one traveled too far from one's birthplace, one's

soul would fly out and return home, leaving one nothing more than a ghost, but if that were true the whole world would be filled with nothing more than wanderers, empty shades. Women's superstition.

He felt an isolation that would grow to become a new part of him, an additional limb. Among the Americans on board, he was a Vietnamese, but even among the refugees, he had little in common. Most were happy to have escaped. Some had sacrificed everything, including families, to be on board. But he had never taken sides. His only allegiance was to Helen, and she had forsaken him.

A young man walked up to shake his hand, and Linh had a dim memory of his face aboard the helicopter. A full, childish face with skin too tender and unformed for a beard.

"Shouldn't you be down below?" the young man said. He had been moping around for hours, sorry for himself that he had missed the war and thinking of how to make an interesting story of the little that he had seen. When he saw Linh, his eyes lit up with possibility.

"Do you know where Helen is?" Linh's legs were shaky, and he gripped the railing to keep standing.

"Not to worry. I gave the cases to a reporter from your office. They're being transferred as we speak. I had no idea who she was. Man, she's a legend."

"Is she on board?" Linh repeated, sterner, closing his eyes with the strain of thought in his addled brain.

"No, not on this ship at least, no. Isn't she staying to cover the changeover?"

Linh said nothing, simply looked into the opaque blue surface of the water. He had suspected that she might try such a thing, but he never guessed that she would try it without him.

"I just arrived in Saigon two weeks ago." He glanced at Linh hopefully.

Linh remained silent. Over the years, he had doubted her love, if that love could only exist in war, if she insisted on staying partly because their love was only possible in his own country. But now he knew that she did love him. Clear now that she was as dependent as any addict on the drug of the war. He had underestimated the damage in her.

"I mean, I hurried! Left the day I graduated college." He laughed. "And I missed the whole damned war."

How would Linh manage to get back to her?

“Maybe we can talk? Later? When you’re feeling yourself? Fill me in. What it was like? I found out who you are. You’ve worked with everyone.”

Linh made a sweeping gesture with his hand, letting go of the railing, his legs slipping out from under him.

The young man grabbed him as he was about to slide under the railing. “Watch it there, mister! You’re coming with me down to sick bay.” He took Linh’s arm. “That was close.”

“I’m fine,” Linh said, although it was obvious to them both he was too weak to stand alone.

“Sorry, but I’m responsible for you. Don’t worry about her. Rumor is she’s charmed. They’ll probably be kicked out of the country within twenty-four hours. She’s well-known. The Communists don’t want any bad publicity.”

Linh closed his eyes and saw sun-bleached fields of elephant grass, the individual blades prostrating themselves, bowing over and over in supplication. That was how one survived, and yet Helen had never learned to bow.

“What they don’t want are any witnesses to what happens next.”