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The War Inside

by Mark Budz

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Author's Note: "As a kid I played with toy guns, *GI Joe*, and those little plastic cowboys, Indians, and soldiers that seemed to embody some uniformly-minted, indestructible sense of national identity and pride. I burned scores of these miniature figures with a magnifying glass and dismembered them with a Daisy BB gun. At some point, around the age of ten or eleven, I became bored with the game of war. I don't know what triggered the change, but as draft-eligible seventeen-year-old a few years after the end of the Vietnam War, I registered as a conscientious objector. Still, that childhood infatuation with war haunts me. I've never stopped trying to understand it, in myself and others."

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"I KID YOU NOT," Rick said. "The quim here will fuckin' blow your mind." He glanced at me with glazed black eyes that looked like small puncture holes in his round, heavy face and took a long swallow of San Miguel. "So, what do you think?"

We sat on metal barstools in the Old Nam, a Denver strip-joint that had

opened up on East Colfax a few months earlier.

“How the hell should I know?” I said. “I’ve never been to Vietnam. I have no idea what it was like.”

“You will,” he said. “Believe me. This is as close as you’re going to get to the real thing.”

According to Rick, this was his second time. He’d stopped in two weeks ago, and had only now gotten up the nerve to come back. It was that intense, he said.

I didn’t know if the place was for real or not. It was hot enough. The air was sticky and perspiration clung to my shirt, glistened on Rick’s face, tickled my upper lip. I could smell rancid sweat, stale beer, and lingering perfume. Tinny music drifted over us. The floor was cluttered with small wooden tables and rickety wicker chairs. It was Friday and all of them were filled. The tables went right up to a low stage at the far end of the room. A thick layer of smoke hung below dim lights shrouded by wide sheets of sagging red cloth, the haze feebly churned by ceiling fans that rotated dark shadows across the crowd. They looked like the slow moving helicopter blades I’d seen on TV, Hueys preparing to take off into a stagnant blanket of jungle-clotted mist.

I sipped my beer and looked at the people around me. Most were in their early- or mid-thirties. Post baby-boomers who had missed out on the war and were trying to find out what it had been like, driven by a sense of curiosity and the feeling that it was finally okay to explore what had happened. That, and the dancers, which is what had motivated Rick. I saw a few guys who might have been vets, but it was hard to tell and I asked Rick if any ever showed up.

He shrugged. “Who knows. The thing is, they already know what it was like. It’s a part of them the same way it’s part of the poontang they’ve got around here. Straight from Nam and the war, man. No shit. The original stuff.”

I shook my head. I found what he said hard to believe. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to.

“You want to know as bad as anyone else. Admit it, man. That’s why you’re here.” He killed his beer, set the bottle on the sticky counter next to us, and signaled to the double-chinned, thickly-rouged woman working the bar for another. She had on a blue satin dress, sleeveless. Rolls of fat strained at the tight, glossy fabric around her stomach and wobbled under her upper arms.

I gazed at the other waitresses sitting and walking around in high heels. Black shiny hair, heavily painted lips, thigh-hugging miniskirts and blouses cinched tight under their breasts. They seemed too young. They hadn’t aged enough. Either they’d been too young twenty-five years ago, or they hadn’t been in the war at all and Rick was feeding me a load of bullshit.

After a while he elbowed me in the ribs and nodded toward the stage. “Get ready for some serious pussy, Ted ol’ buddy. It’s show-time.”

She had on this sheer silk kimono, open in the front. I could see the black brassiere and G-string she wore beneath it. Her long hair swung gently around her bored, listless face as she began to dance, hips rotating, hands running up and down her body, loosening the lace brassiere finally and letting it drop to the stage.

“Jesus,” Rick said. “Couldn’t you just fuck that to tears? Asian women. God, I love ‘em.”

He finished his second beer, started in on a third.

The dancer was on her knees now, legs spread wide, body twisting back, hair swaying as she let the green silk fabric slide off her shoulders. Her breasts shuddered under the hot spotlights, and when I glanced around I saw prostitutes leaning over the men or sitting on their laps, arms draped around their shoulders while they whispered in their ears.

“Bitches’ll do anything you want,” Rick said, his eyes locked on the stage. “Suck your balls dry more ways than you can count. The sweetest dick-squeezing pussy you could ever want if you’d just crawled out of the jungle, your guts all knotted up from getting shot at, thinking every shadow that moved was out to slit your throat.”

I nodded and swallowed hard, took a quick swig of beer and tried to keep my sweaty hand from shaking, the cold wet beer bottle from slipping out of it.

My head was filled with the articles, news reports and documentaries of what it had been like, the sense of shame I felt every time I saw a vet, knowing they’d given up more than one or two years of their lives and the whole country had spit on them when they’d come home, either because they’d fought in the war at all, or fought and lost.

“You worried about Judy?” Rick asked.

“A little.”

“Now you know what a lot of the guys in Nam felt like. Be pretty damn hard to ignore all this available pussy when your girlfriend’s ten thousand miles away and the next day might be your last.” He grinned at me, winked, and then returned his attention to the stage.

I felt her behind me before I saw her. A warm presence surrounded by nauseatingly strong perfume that cut through the reek of cigarettes and tensed my neck muscles. I turned on my seat, looked into full crimson lips and black eyes beneath heavy mascara and green lids. She wore a tight red halter top and a short, black leather skirt.

“I’ve been watching you, man. You make me so horny. So horny I can’t believe it.” She licked her lips, ran a hand down one thigh.

“Now’s your chance,” Rick said. He grinned again. “Fifty bucks for the experience of a lifetime.”

“Forty,” the prostitute said. “I’m so horny.” My gut clenched. I could feel a wave of heat running down my cock, and gritted my teeth.

“I’ll catch you later,” Rick said. “Have fun, buddy.” He slid off his chair and disappeared into the crowd.

“What you say?” the woman asked, her breath warm and sultry. “You want it like never before, or not?”

She sat on the empty stool next to me, straddled it with both legs and leaned forward. “I’ll love you good. Long and hard like your girlfriend. I’ll give you what you want, make you forget everything else.”

I felt her hand on my leg, and fear exploded inside me. Terror, ripping and searing like shrapnel. I smelled shit and wondered if it was my own. My mouth was dry and metallic-tasting. I could feel the warm beer bottle in my hand, but I couldn’t move it. My hand was paralyzed and it seemed like my intestines had unraveled, dropped out of my asshole.

I don’t have to go through with this, I told myself. *I don’t*. It was a lie, though. Inside, the war had already begun.

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She lay back and drew both legs up alongside her stomach, the miniskirt bunching around her waist. I stood a few feet from the end of the bed, my shoes, pants and underwear in a pile on the floor, the tails of my unbuttoned shirt trailing against my thighs and buttocks. A naked light bulb hung from the ceiling, cast harsh shadows across the bamboo walls, the soft angles of her face. I saw a pile of yellow paper napkins on the table next to the bed, a jar of cold cream. Then she took off her top and let both knees fall open, butterfly style. There were teeth marks on her breasts, yellow bruises down her legs and the inside of her arms.

“What’re you waiting for, man?” Glossy red fingernails stroked her crotch, traced their way upward across her belly and nipples as she brought her arms up over her head, wrapped them around the gleaming mass of tousled hair on the pillows.

Her hips made small, rhythmic movements on the rumpled sheets. I took a step forward, and dropped to my knees between her legs. I leaned over, planted my hands beside her, and breathed in perfume laced with sweat, the pungent smell of flesh. When I lay on top of her I closed my eyes, not wanting to look into the bored, lifeless pupils staring past me.

There was a violent thrust and I found myself face down in a muddy quagmire that sucked at my sprawled-out arms and legs, making it hard to move. Rotting leaves clung to my lips and nose, and I struggled to breathe, short choking gasps that wracked me. The sun felt like a heat lamp, and in the distance I could hear the dull thudding roar of an air strike, feel it reverberating through the dank ground, echoing in my ears. My right leg throbbed. I reached down blindly, touched slick dirt on tattered cloth, and when I twisted onto my side and looked I saw that below the knee it was gone. Panic squeezed my heart, crushing it, and bile burned in my throat.

A land mine, I told myself. Jesus fucking Christ. I thought I could still move my toes even though they weren't there, feel them pressing against the hard leather of my missing boot.

After a while I heard voices, felt the steady pulse of choppers hammering through the air, and blood pooling inside me somewhere. I laid my cheek down in the cool mud and felt myself go numb all over, not caring anymore whether I lived or died.

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The sound of a dead-bolt being unlocked jolted me awake and I sat up fast, the room spinning crazily. I tried to clear my head. Sunlight ricocheted in through the bedroom window above me, glanced painfully off the walls, the mirror above the dresser. Out in the living room I heard the front door open and close, footsteps padding softly across the carpet to the open door a few feet away.

I rubbed my eyes and squinted through the opening, saw Judy's shadow on the rug and then her face, bright as ever above faded jeans and a white sleeveless blouse. She came over to the edge of the bed and sat down. I groaned, eased onto my back again and closed my eyes, put a hand over my forehead to massage my temples.

"Must've been some office party," she said. I felt her hand on my chest, moving in slow aimless circles.

"A few of us went out afterwards."

"I figured." Her fingers moved under the covers. My stomach tightened and I reflexively caught her wrist, not wanting her to feel the stiff matted hair farther down.

Judy leaned forward, red hair and blue eyes spilling over me. When her lips were a few inches from mine she suddenly stiffened. "You bastard," she said softly. "Who was it? One of your hot little secretaries?" She tried to pull away and I held her wrist more tightly, fear knifing through the haze.

I moved my head sideways on the pillow. "A joke," I said. "It's not what you think. Some of the guys started spraying perfume, testers they'd picked up at one of the department stores." It sounded lame, even to me.

Judy stared at me for a moment and I let the hand on my forehead drop to the bed.

“Not even very good stuff,” I went on. “You’d think a bunch of financial execs could have done better. Obsession, Chanel No. 5 or something like that.” I tried to laugh, but it hurt too much and my mouth was thick and cottony. It was the first time I’d lied to her about anything in the year we’d known each other.

She took a deep breath and I felt her relax. “At least you could have showered,” she said.

“Sorry. I didn’t think it was that big a deal.”

“It will be if we take Erik to the zoo. Nothing will come within a hundred yards of us.”

“Shit,” I said, glancing at the clock on the night stand next to me.

“It’s all right. I don’t pick him up until eleven.” She gave me a quick kiss and then straightened. “I’ll fix breakfast while you get cleaned up, take care of that headache of yours.”

“Right.” I waited until she left, then hurried out of bed to the bathroom.

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I let the warm water stream over me, sluicing through the residue of last night. I slumped against the shower stall and tilted my head back. The water felt like a heavy rain. It dripped from my hair and pounded down around me, mixing with the rank smell of sodden vegetation, napalm and burning thatch.

My eyes snapped open. Beyond the shower curtain smoke mingled with the steam fogging the mirror of the sink. I thought I could see shadows moving in the mist. Goose pimples raised on my arms and the back of my neck. I shut the water off and trembled, the heels of both hands pressed hard against my face as I breathed in the smell of scrambled eggs and toast.

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“You look terrible,” Judy said.

I nodded. We were in her car, heading west over one of the viaducts that connects downtown to the surrounding metropolitan area. The sky was clear and blue over dark green foothills and silverhued mountains. Ahead of us I-25 shuffled four lanes of north-south traffic along at an uneven crawl. Judy’s ex-husband lived on the northern edge town, and I could tell it was going to be a long day driving there, back to the zoo, and then on to her place farther south.

“How’s your mother these days?” I asked after a while.

“Better. I talked to her last night when I couldn’t get a hold of you. I don’t

know how she stands it there, as warm as it is.”

“Some people like that kind of climate,” I said.

“I guess you get used to it,” Judy said. “Like anything else.”

“I suppose.” My palms were sweaty even though she had the air conditioning on, and I had to keep wiping them on my pants. I tried to block out what I remembered of Florida, but I couldn’t. We’d flown to Orlando after her mother had suffered a mild stroke, and the unrelenting heat and humidity still beat heavily in my head, like a bad memory. It had been terrible then, but it was worse now, and my stomach felt queasy.

“She still wants to know when we’re going to get married,” Judy said.

“You’re kidding.”

“That’s what I said. I told her I needed more time, and she started in on how Erik’s at that age where he needs a father.”

“He’s already got one.”

“A full-time father. I tried to reason with her, but she won’t listen. You know how stubborn mothers can be.” Judy smiled. “It could be worse. At least she likes you.”

“Yeah.”

Judy reached out and put a hand on my knee. “Don’t worry. I’m not desperate. Not yet, anyway.”

“I’m not worried,” I said, the words sounding strange, like they weren’t my own. Before, I’d wanted it to work. Now I wasn’t so sure. It seemed that I was kidding myself, that what I was looking for, a certain measure of stability in my life, would never happen. Not the way I wanted it to, at least. No matter what, I would always be lacking something, freedom or security. I had the feeling there wasn’t anything I could do about it, that she could never really understand what I was going through, so I turned my head and stared blankly at the rundown commercial buildings sliding by like the gutted remains of a bombed-out, deserted city.

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Judy pulled into the wide half-circle drive of the house, a huge plantation style mansion with elegant white columns and hand-carved woodwork. Her ex was a corporate lawyer and made good money. That’s how he’d managed to get the kid.

“I’ll only be a few minutes,” Judy said.

She got out of the car and I watched her walk up to the porch. The house and those around it seemed out of place, not quite real with their manicured lawns, sculpted shrubbery and expensive vernacular set against the arid plains of eastern

Colorado. It reminded me of the French-style homes I'd seen in Saigon, the discotheques and billboards advertising American movies, as if an entire culture had been transplanted—displaced. It didn't make sense, dragging what you knew and loved into a war so you could watch it be destroyed, and I shook my head thinking about it before I realized that the memories couldn't be mine.

When I looked again Judy was gone and the house was shrouded in jungle, a colonial mansion in southeast Asia. It wavered unsteadily and I squeezed my eyes shut, pressed a thumb and forefinger into them hard and watched an explosive kaleidoscope of buried faces swim out of the darkness. Men and pimply-faced boys who'd come home in telegrams or body bags. Dead NVA laying face up in a swampy ditch, flies crawling out of their nostrils, over parched shriveled eyes that stared up out of the corpse-infested earth.

The car door opened and my head jerked up. Judy had Erik by the arm and was herding him into the back seat. He had a Dinorider with him, one of those battery powered Tyrannosaurus rexes that come with an array of high-tech weapons. He plopped down, and Judy slid the driver's seat back, climbed in and slammed the door shut. She gripped the steering wheel with both hands, her face flushed but rigid, lips welded grimly together.

"That son of a bitch," she whispered, her hands locked on the wheel. "He's planning to move to Dallas. Says he's going to take Erik with him."

"Can he do that?"

"I don't know. I'll have to call my goddamn lawyer. Christ, I thought this shit was over with."

She sucked in a sharp breath. Behind me Erik was making rapid-fire machine gun sounds from behind his teeth. Each burst sent a tremor along my nerves, and I could feel the muscles in my neck and back begin to twitch and crawl.

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I called Rick from a pay phone at the zoo. The receiver shook as I punched in the numbers, and I had to steady it with both hands while I waited. He answered on the fifth ring, drunk. In the background I could hear a college football game, interrupted every now and then by loud cheering and swearing.

"What?" he said, shouting above the noise.

"The war. It's still with me."

"Yeah. How was it? A real trip, right?"

"I can't get rid of it, that's what. It's weird. I was humping my brains out, and it wasn't me anymore. It was someone else inside her, and I was in the war. I think it was someone she'd had before. Some guy in Nam who'd been through all that. Now, I keep having these flashbacks."

“No shit. The minute I pull out the joy ride’s over with. Back in the good ol’ U. S. of A.”

“I’m in trouble, man. You hear what I’m saying?”

“I latched on to one right after you,” he went on. “Great tits. It was all I could think about while I was getting my ass shot at. Mortars going off around me. Bullets shredding the air, cutting up leaves like a goddamn Vegematic. Jesus, they were beautiful. I’m gettin’ hard just thinkin’ about it.”

“Goddamnit, Rick, you’re not listening. I need help.”

“You could try seein’ a counselor.”

“Right. What the hell am I supposed to say? That I picked up post traumatic stress at a nightclub. I’d be laughed right out of the goddamn office.”

“Nah. They’d just think you were crazy and roll out the red carpet.”

“A lot of fuckin’ help you are.”

“Listen,” he said. “It’s almost halftime. Why don’t you dump Judy for a couple of hours, come on over and watch the game, have a few beers? It’ll give you a chance to unwind, get your head together.”

“I don’t know what the hell’s going on,” I said. “I’m not in control anymore and I’m scared shitless.”

But he wasn’t listening. I could hear him shouting to the guys in the other room. I slammed the phone down hard and stared at the twisted remains of defoliated trees rising up around me, like skeletons out of a fog.

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“You all right?” Judy asked, walking across the living room to the sofa where I lay. “You look a little pale.”

“Headache,” I said. “Is he asleep?”

“Tucked in for the night. He was pretty tired.” She sat down on the sofa beside me. A dull ache hammered in the back of my head and I felt nauseous. There was an ugly rash on both arms and my eyes burned.

“It’s been a long day,” she said. I nodded and she bent down and kissed me, her tongue gentle but urgent.

I put my hand on one of her breasts and with the other unsnapped her jeans, pulled the zipper down and worked my hand inside, felt the tension drain out of her. She loosened my belt, then squeezed me and stood, pulling me after her with one hand. We went into the bedroom and slipped out of our clothes. Judy lay on the bed, and I felt last night rip through me like an aftershock. All I could think about

was being face down in the mud with part of my leg gone and everything else going limp.

“You really must not be feeling very well,” Judy said few moments later. She sat up and stroked me, her tongue flicking and teasing, but it was no good.

“Sorry,” I said.

Judy got up. “I think I’ll fix some tea.”

I watched her walk down the hall, listened to the clanking of pans in the kitchen, the sound of the faucet as she filled the teapot. Ten minutes later, when the pot began to whistle, I was still standing there, waiting for it to end.

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Monday morning I called in sick. Around eleven the phone rang. It was Rick.

“Where the hell are you?” he demanded.

“Under the weather.”

“No shit. In case you forgot, we’ve got a major sales presentation this afternoon. A career-maker, remember?”

“Fuck it.”

“Jesus Christ, I don’t believe what I’m hearing. What the hell’s wrong with you, pissing your life away because of some worthless cunt?”

“I’ve got some thinking to do, all right?”

“In the meantime it’s bend over, Rick. My ass is getting reamed because you’re feeling guilty or depressed or whatever.”

“Go to hell. Your head’s so far up your ass you don’t know what’s going on.”

“Look,” he said. “Why don’t we have lunch, talk things over. Rennie’s at twelve, okay?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t think,” he said, “just do.”

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Rennie’s was upscale down-to-earth. Expensive pâté and sprouts. Imported wine. Rough, butcher block tables and oak chairs with lots of hanging plants below angled skylights. I never could figure out why Rick liked the place. Maybe he thought it made up for his usual beer and pretzels approach to life. He had a window table with a view of the new airport, and when I walked up he was watching the jets take off and land.

“Beautiful,” he said. “You look like warmed-over shit. What happened? Judy cut you off?”

“Wouldn’t make any difference.” I took a sip of water from the glass in front of me.

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t get it up. Hell, I don’t even want to.”

“So? You wouldn’t be the first. That’s no reason to trash your whole life, everything you’ve worked for.”

I held onto the slick, condensation beaded glass with both hands. “I think it’s some kind of reaction. Agent orange. Dioxin. I read somewhere it screws up your sex drive. Saturday, at the zoo, this stuff was blowing all over the place. There were hardly any trees or bushes left, and I had this rash, tiny blisters underneath my skin.”

“It’s all in your head, man. Psychosomatic. You realize that, don’t you?”

I squeezed the glass harder, watched the skin on my knuckles turn to ivory. “Afterwards, Judy wanted to make it, you know. I tried, but it was no good. I was just going through the motions. I didn’t feel anything. Inside, something had died, and I wanted to cry, but I couldn’t. I felt as mutilated and empty as the guys who lost arms and legs.”

Rick looked at me hard while he fiddled with a napkin on the table. A waitress came up and I leaned back, still holding on to the glass. I could see his eyes checking her out as we ordered, pupils darting up and down her body.

When she was gone he said, “Look, lots of guys made it through the war without any serious problems. It was hell, sure, but they pulled themselves together and are leading normal lives. Nobody ever talks about them, but they’re out there. Guys who figured out a way to cope because it was the only choice they had if they wanted to stay sane and go on living. Somehow they managed to put it behind them, and that’s what you’ve got to do.”

“Sure. How the hell am I supposed to do that when I don’t even know what’s real anymore and what’s not? If my feelings are my own, or someone else’s?”

Rick slammed his fist down hard, rattling the table. “*This* is real, goddamnit. Right here, right now. All that other shit is history. Christ, even the Vietnamese people managed to rebuild their lives, and they suffered a helluva lot. What I’m sayin’ is remember the past, but don’t live in it. Treat it the same as that whore you had. Experience it, learn from it, and then get rid of it, like a piece of used toilet paper.”

“You’re sick, you know that. I didn’t ask for what happened. But you eat this shit up.”

“The hell you didn’t. You dipped your wick the same as me.”

Our voices had risen. People were looking and at the same time trying not to.

“Don’t do this to me,” Rick said. “If you want to ruin your life, fine, but don’t drag me down with you. Get through this afternoon and I’ll help you out any way I can. I swear it. Whatever you want.”

“What if I don’t make it? What if I have a flashback and fall apart. It’ll be worse than if I didn’t show up at all.”

“You’ll be fine,” he said. “There was no way to win the war in Nam, but you can win this one. All you’ve got to do is tell yourself to keep moving forward. If you don’t, you’re going to be stuck right where you are. What do you say?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “I’d like to, but I can’t get rid of it. Like the melody to a song that’s stuck in your head. You force yourself to concentrate on something else, another tune maybe, and after a while you think it’s finally gone, but it’s not, and all of a sudden there it is again and there’s not a goddamned thing you can do about it. It keeps playing, over and over again, until you get so frustrated and pissed off you’ll do almost anything to end it.”

I closed my eyes. Part of me was starting to drift again, the plants blending into a dense, leafy canopy, the skylights shafting between them. I tried to hold on and felt myself tremble, like an addict going cold turkey. Then I heard the waitress. Plates clanked loudly on the table and my hand jumped, spilling water across the surface.

“I’ll get some more napkins,” the waitress said. She hurried off and I saw Rick watching her ass, the quick movement of her hips.

“I know what you’re saying,” Rick said. “Believe me. I have the same problem with women. I think about ‘em every goddamn second of the day the same way you’re thinking about the war. If they weren’t so fuckin’ beautiful, I think I’d kill myself.”

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Six hours later I stood in front of the weathered, graffiti-stained door of the Old Nam. It had taken me that long to work up the courage to go back. I’d spent most of the afternoon walking around downtown and Washington park, trying to convince myself that it was the right thing to do, that I hadn’t made a mistake by telling Rick to eat shit and die. During the day my intestines had balled up, and I’d spent as much time on a toilet as I had on my feet. My guts were still cramped, but by now the spasms were nothing but dry heaves.

Asshole, I thought. Get it over with.

When I stepped through the doorway my hands started to shake and I stuffed them into my pockets. It seemed like I’d never left. Nothing had changed except for

the dancer on the stage, and after a while even that would be the same, hips, shoulders and arms gyrating under the hot lights.

I paused just inside the door for a few minutes, watching, then turned and headed for the bar. I sat down, ordered a beer from the overweight woman at the counter, and peered through the dim haze at the waitresses out on the floor. It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust, and a little longer for me to find her. She was with three guys at a table close to the stage, not far from the EMPLOYEES ONLY door that led to the rooms in back.

I sipped my beer shakily and watched her work, the hands of the men grabbing her ass and reaching for her breasts as she playfully squirmed away, leading them on. Don't think, I remembered Rick saying. Just do.

I chugged the rest of my beer and stood unsteadily, made my way over to the table, sweat crawling down my sides, stinging the corners of my eyes. Her perfume burned my already-raw throat, spun my head dizzily as I grabbed her by the arm.

"Hey," she said. "What do you want, man? I'm busy."

"This way," I said, yanking her after me.

One of the guys at the table got up fast. His knees banged hard against the edge, scattering bottles and foamy beer.

"Son of a bitch," he said, wiping at the wet spot on his pant legs.

There was a wadded up twenty in my pocket. I pulled it out and tossed it on the table. "This one's on me," I said, pulling her toward the door.

"You owe me," she said when we were in the back hall. "Fifty bucks for each one of those guys."

"Which room?" I asked, shoving her down the door-lined corridor.

She went into the same room we'd been in before. I closed the door behind us, heard the latch click softly. It sounded like the bolt of a gun being pulled back, and I wondered if I could go through with it. I couldn't feel my hands or feet. They seemed wooden and unfamiliar, as if they belonged to someone else. I closed my eyes for a second, felt myself start to tumble aimlessly, and quickly opened them.

"Let's get on with it," she said. "I haven't got all night."

She was already loosening the black-and-green flowered blouse she had on. I stepped forward and took her by the wrists.

"What's your problem, man? You some kind of addict, or what?"

"I need to know how," I said, my voice a barely audible whisper. "Why."

“What difference does it make? You want it, or not?”

I shook my head and tightened my fingers, squeezing the bone beneath them.

“Knock it off, asshole.” She tried to pull away and we stumbled to one side. Her knee came up, catching me in the hip, and one of her hands raked painfully across my face. I knocked it away and caught her by the throat, slammed her hard against the wall and held her there. Her eyes had the same glazed, lifeless look as those of the dead NVA soldiers, as if they’d been dulled by everything she’d seen and been through.

“You going to kill me?” she asked, forcing the words through her clenched throat. “Strangle the life out of me the way you did my country?”

“No,” I said, wondering if maybe it was true. I’d come looking for answers, a way of getting rid of what possessed me, of choking to death the memories, guilt and anger that were tearing me apart.

“Even if you do, she went on, “I won’t die. You can’t undo what you’ve done. I’ll live on. I’m inside you the same way you were inside me and the rest of us, our villages and homes.”

It took a couple of seconds for my fingers to relax. There would be bruises on her neck and wrists, and I thought of all the other guys that had done the same thing trying to escape themselves, the marks they had left.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, to her, but also to myself.

She didn’t say anything, and a moment later I let her go. Warm spit struck the side of my face. I pressed my forehead and fists against the wall and listened to the small movements she made knotting her blouse, slipping into her red high heels. I could still feel her throat between my fingers, the ragged words passing through them, and her pulse throbbing to the rhythm of my own heart, telling me it was possible to carry death inside you and go on living.

A few minutes later, when she was finally gone, my hands relaxed and my breath came easier. Her strong perfume lingered in the air, mixing with the other memories she had given me as the saliva began to cool on my cheek, taking away some of the pain and bitterness I felt by reminding me of hers.

It felt like a tear, one I had cried myself.