
FOUR**Reflections On An Empty Building**

The sudden loss of freedom. That's what had knocked me for such a loop back then. Naturally, after I was in the Army for awhile, and had gotten used to the idea, it became easier to accept. But, initially, it was rough.

There was little point in trying to sleep with our departure for Vietnam only hours away. So I got up in the darkness and made my way to the back door of the building. These old, wooden barracks had two floors to them and my bunk was located on the second floor. I stepped outside onto the small landing at the top of the stairs and leaned forward to rest my folded arms on the wooden railing surrounding it.

The night air was damp and heavy with a cool mist that caused a mild halo effect around all the lights in the area. This was especially noticeable at the brightly lighted vending machines against the wall of another building up the street.

Two things had become more noticeable since I'd stepped outside. One was the continuous hum of that distant generator. It was clearer now, reminding me of the generators I remembered hearing at midways and carnivals when I was a kid. Back then they were mounted on the bed of a big, white truck and were an integral part of the carnival atmosphere, adding their powerful din to the fun and gaiety of the event. Now, however, that lone whine, from somewhere out beyond my field of view, only managed to make the area feel even more deserted at this late hour.

The other thing I noticed was that the barracks next door to ours was empty.

Until last night there'd been men quartered in that barracks too, just as I and the others were in this one right now. But early this morning they'd been flown out to the same place we'd be going tomorrow. I couldn't help but wonder what they were seeing and doing at this moment, half a world away from where they'd been such a short time ago.

What made that darkened building seem so forlorn was the fact that those men were just a passing memory to it now. Thousands of them, each with his own thoughts, emotions and character, had spent time waiting in there. Yet, not one of them would ever return to say that he missed it in the least. It was only a brief stopover on the way to somewhere else.

I also knew instinctively that tomorrow night, after my group was gone, the new arrivals quartered in that building, across the way, would look over at our empty building and wonder about the same things.

I felt a quick shiver pass through my body as the mist began to penetrate my fatigues. Deep inside, however, I knew it wasn't just the dampness affecting me. There was always that nagging thought of tomorrow.

With that in mind, I made my way back inside to lie on my bunk again. Though the lights were out, and it was still dark, I brought an arm up to rest across my eyes. Once more I drifted back to a time when I was still naively hopeful that my present situation didn't lay just over the horizon.