

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Six o’clock in front of the Union,” Vida said, on the morning of October fifteenth. “You can still change your mind, you know. We need you for the Lottery Performance.” She stood up and pulled on her jacket.

“Got it,” Judy said.

“No, you don’t get it, Judy. No one understands why you won’t be part of the Performance. I don’t get it. Marsha doesn’t get it. Michael wants to talk to you about it. He’ll be in the Tune Room all day setting up, so you’d better find him there before six. And, you know David’s pissed.” You’re the one who told him to do an SMC-sponsored event, after all. She threw her bag over her arm, grabbed what was portable off her breakfast plate, and shook a piece of bacon at Judy as she turned to leave the cafeteria. “You’ll be there.”

Judy was almost sorry she ever mentioned the “The Lottery” story. She had only come down to breakfast to get away from Maggie, who had been at her about all the horrible things that could happen if she went to the Moratorium. Now Vida was on her case.

She needed to find a place to be alone. This was going to be her day. She wanted to plot it out carefully, without interference. She ducked into the TV room. Though it was empty at this hour, she still took a seat in the far corner. She reached into her pocket and pulled the article Michael had given her from the *Clarion* with the schedule of activities and reviewed it,

wondering where to start. She wanted to attend as many activities as she could, certain it was her best chance to catch up to the others in their understanding of the war.

“Yeah, that’s the biggest lie since the Gulf of Tonkin,” David said to Fish just the day before when he said he found a piece of actual meat in his vegetable beef soup. Even Howie seemed to know what he meant. She always confused the Gulf of Tonkin with the *Pueblo* incident. Weren’t they both submarines, boats? She hadn’t paid that much attention. She had always been a good student, but now she felt as if she had come into a class midterm and was trying to piece it all together without being able to let on about what she didn’t know.

She looked down the list of lectures and discussions led by what had to be every group on campus. The topics covered the gamut: “The Real Roots of the War: How We Got Involved and How We Can Get Out,” “The Deception of the Domino Theory,” “Countdown to the Revolution.” There were also multiple protest activities, including sit-ins at each of the administrative buildings, group signings of petitions to be sent to Washington, and sessions to express feelings about the war where you could participate in writing an epic poem like the *Iliad*, painting a giant banner like *Guernica*, or writing a protest song. The day would end with a candlelight march at dusk across campus, through town and back to a final rally at the Union.

The performance of “The Lottery” was to be held just before the march. They were going to read the entire story out loud, and she knew they would need a large cast.

As much as she wanted to participate, she couldn’t risk the exposure. It was one thing to hand out leaflets in her dorm, but this was different. She was pretty sure CIU was low enough on the radar not to have government spies infiltrating the student movement, but she couldn’t risk showing up in a *Clarion* photo.

She ticked off a list of the sessions she wanted to attend but felt she should start by at least making the gesture of attending a class just to see what would happen, especially MacNeal's, given how he had shut down Wizard's friend about his grade.

Today, class attendance was spotty, and MacNeal motioned for everyone to come down and fill from the front rather than stay spread out. That made it easier for Judy to avoid sitting in her usual spot, next to Pete. MacNeal paced as they rearranged themselves, then settled with his hands gripping the podium, staring at them until they began to shift and whisper.

"I know I'm supposed to be talking about the war today," he said finally. "But what do I know about it? I'm a chemistry teacher."

The room waited to see what he would say next. They began to fidget.

"So, here it is," MacNeal said, at last. "If you want to talk about the war, go ahead." He gestured toward the door. "There are all kinds of people out there to do so with you. But if you stay here, we're going to talk about chemistry." He turned to the board, picked up a piece of chalk, and began to write out the equation for a redox reaction.

The students responded unevenly, some packing up immediately, sneering at how he could ignore an issue as important as the war, but most looking around to see what everyone else would do.

Judy felt she had to leave. She couldn't focus on chemistry and was anxious to get out and see what else was going on, but she felt odd about it. As she walked up the stairs and took a final look back, MacNeal was continuing to lecture to five students as if the room were full. He asked Pete a question about the equation. Judy knew the answer but kept walking.

Once out the door, it was as if a bell had rung and the entire school population had bolted outdoors. They were playful, like kids on a snow day, or the beginning of spring when classes moved outside to the lawn. Students were sharing schedules, bent over sidewalk tables full of literature, wandering over to hear music, or gathered around a speaker. It was as if permanently gray CIU had suddenly become ignited with energy; even the sun had come out, shining on the many colors of the fall leaves.

She wandered from forum to forum, staying for an entire presentation or leaving early if she got the premise right away and could move on to check out something else.

Throughout the day she felt both liberated to be able to just listen and learn, and uneasy as a double agent, hiding from two camps. She was careful to avoid *Clarion* cameras and made sure to hang at the edges, sitting in the last row or leaning against a wall in the back, apart from what had now become her group of friends. She would acknowledge people she knew with a nod if they spotted her and then turn quickly to the speaker as if rapt with attention.

Judy came into the packed Watson Auditorium for “The Real Roots of the War” session as they were finishing up about the French involvement in Indochina. On the stage, the speaker concluded, and Swanson took over, unbuttoning his tweed coat and hanging his thumbs from the loops of his jeans.

“The real flashpoint,” he said, “was the incident at the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964.” Judy perked up. No wonder she didn’t know. She had been in eighth grade. She listened carefully as Swanson detailed the attacks by North Vietnam on US destroyers.

“That can be viewed as the real start of the war,” he said. “President Johnson went on television on the fourth of August to announce air strikes against North Vietnam, a huge escalation.”

It was the summer. She was fourteen. She would have been at the beach, not watching the news.

“But was it really an attack, or an excuse? Was Johnson just itching for this fight? How much was true and how much was an arrogant charade for a country that prides itself on the fact that we have never lost a war?”

“These are not rhetorical questions, people,” he went on. “We need to know the answers. Do you know if Tonkin was real or a setup?” He pointed to a girl in the third row wearing a yellow paisley tunic.

She sunk in her seat.

Judy was glad she blended in, in her denim and olive drab.

“How are we supposed to know what really happened, if the government is lying to us?” Heads turned toward a female voice on the side of the auditorium.

Judy recognized her as one of the Trots. Wil was sitting next to her.

“Exactly,” Swanson said. “We don’t know what to believe. We don’t have the facts, or know if the facts are true. We need to question: question authority, question everything.” He let them shout their agreement.

Judy felt he was talking directly to her. Hadn’t she just blindly accepted this scholarship, caring only about herself, without questioning anything?

“There is, however, something we absolutely all know is true,” Swanson said, raising his voice. “There’s a lottery coming. They’re dusting off an old Selective Service tool that hasn’t been used since World War II. A draft lottery can wipe out the lives of half the men in this room, men who are considered too young to vote but not too young to die.”

“So, what do we do?” a voice said from the middle of the room.

“Get informed. I know you all hate hearing this, but you’re in a bubble here on campus. It’s the first time a war is on television every night, and you’re not tuning in. I bet you never thought a teacher would tell you to watch TV, and I know there are only a few sets on campus, but you have to get involved and work harder to realize what’s going on. Then you can better decide what you want to do.

“And, that’s what today is all about,” he continued. “It’s a moratorium. Do you know what that means?” He went on to explain that a moratorium was a delay, a postponement, to give time to reflect, to question, so the country didn’t stumble blindly ahead in a direction that might be wrong. It would be a series—one day in October, two days in November, three days in December—until the end of the war.

Swanson took off his jacket, laid it across the podium, and wiped the sweat from his receding hairline. He moved dead center on the stage. “How many of you are going to Washington for the next one on November fifteenth? We need a million marchers to make our point.”

“I am,” scattered voices said, accompanied by a few raised hands.

“That’s it? I see.” He slowly turned his head and scanned the room. “You think you don’t have power because you’re kids? Because you don’t think anyone will listen?

“Don’t underestimate yourselves. Each of you has a choice, a decision to make, a conscience to deal with.” He pointed a finger in a half circle across the width of the auditorium. Judy was sure he was looking right into her soul. “What will you tell your children you did right here at this decisive moment? Your actions today will define who you are . . . and who you will ever hope to become.

“There are thousands listening to us today, there will be a million on November fifteenth when the whole world truly will be watching.” He paused. “Now, let me ask again. Are you going to Washington?”

“Yes!” yelled the crowd. Judy had to catch herself to keep from joining them.

“And you’re going because . . .”

“The whole world is watching.”

Swanson nodded, picking up his jacket as the crowd chanted in obedience, arms pumping with clenched fists.

“The whole world is watching. The whole world is watching.” The chanting went on for a while, then dribbled down, first softer, then with fewer voices.

Swanson would be going to Washington himself, people whispered around her.

Judy watched a plump woman in tight jeans confidently stride across the stage to shake Swanson’s hand. Judy recognized her as one of the student senators. She lowered the rostrum microphone.

“We’re sending at least two buses from CIU to Washington, but we can rent more,” she said. “So, sign up by October thirty-first. Registration forms are in the back. You can turn them in at the Tune Room or any of the dorms.”

Judy took one of the orange slips being passed out at the exits. She stared at it, then at all the students filing out of the auditorium, envying them their freedom. Any one of them could go to Washington as easily as filling out this form.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Judy headed across campus, the folded registration slip in her pocket, passing in front of the Quad where a few musicians were singing, “Be the first one on your block to have your son come home in a box.”

She saw David’s hat and duster and was about to skirt the area when she realized he had his arm around a small blonde. A zip of pain, like an electric charge, shot through her. It was Sally, a girl she had only seen once before, passing in front of David.

“What a body,” she had overheard him say to Achilles, as she watched Sally walk ahead of them early in the semester, wondering at the appeal of her hipless, breastless, little pencil shape. He probably called her Mustang Sally. Now, she turned quickly and headed to the lagoon as the musicians’ chorus echoed in her ears, “Whoopee! We’re all going to die.”

The wind was up, and it was really too cold to sit on the grass, but she did it anyway, clutching her knees and covering her face, until she settled down enough to look up.

She watched red and gold leaves detach and seem to remain at bay, suspended, waiting to be thrown across the water by a gust or just land at random on the soft, browning grass. She picked one up, then tossed it, choosing another that still had some green, yellow green like David’s eyes. She carefully took it apart, separating the smooth leaf material from the veins until there was nothing left but the skeleton.

“He loves me not,” she said out loud, as she held out her palm, letting the wind take away the remains.

It was because she had stopped him. She knew it, even though she assumed they were just playing around. She let him unhook her bra, but not unzip her pants. He talked about how they didn't need to play games, and she said games could be fun and teased him about his wandering hand trouble, WHT they called it in high school. She had lost more than one second date to WHT in her time but never with anyone she really liked. David was different. How many guys who looked like he did knew about Sartre or could lead something like the grape boycott?

Acronyms scrambled in her head: WHT, SMC, ROTC. She was in WRAIN, the Walter Reed Army Institute of Nursing program. ROTC . . . WRAIN . . . different letters, same thing. No one knew what WRAIN was, thank God. There were no slurs like ROT-ZEE. What could they say? She's WRAIN? WRAIN, rain, everywhere but not a drop . . .

She was tired of feeling so stupid—stupid about David, stupid about being trapped into this army thing. She should have been smarter about both and thought there was a time when she would have been. She had even been kind of excited about the army at first, once she'd accepted it. As a kid, she had nearly memorized every image in her mother's scrapbooks: pictures of London and the south of France, ticket stubs and playbills of events enjoyed on leave when the cities were in blackout, and photos of clowning GIs and captured German soldiers huddled together at a train station. Interspersed had been clippings about casualties, veiny snapshots of the rubble after bombings, and liberated POWs with dead gazes, not believing they were now free.

From time to time throughout her childhood, her mother had gone through some of the photos with her, talking about range-of-motion triage for prisoners who were frozen in the fetal

position, the maggots used to eat the dead tissue off the burn victims, and how severed limbs were thrown on the cots with their wounded owners, to keep all the parts together. Judy had even pictured herself in the scenes, working alongside her mother, imagining the smell of prisoners who hadn't washed in years, the fat white worms, what it would be like to wake up next to your own detached arm. She felt amazed at what her mother had been able to do and wanted to do it, too, until she was grown and realized her mother had already lived that life. Her future needed to be all her own, with no comparisons and no obligations. And, above all, *this* war wasn't anything like *that* war, as she was understanding more sharply by the day.

She wished there was someone she could level with. It wasn't the same, talking with Pete. After all, as he said, he *had* to do something about his military service, WRAIN had been her choice, even if it didn't really feel that way to Judy. There had only been one other girl at CIU in the program. Her name was Anna or Anita or something. Her recruiting officer had encouraged Judy to look her up, and she had seemed nice enough, a tall, plain person with efficient edges you could spot as a nurse a mile off, but she had never heard from her after the brief hello her first week on campus. Anita was a year older and would have transferred to Walter Reed by now. She wondered how all this was coming down out there. No student strike, that's for sure. Anita probably had no qualms at all, or maybe she had been knocked up by some handsome radical and kicked out of the program.

Judy shook herself out of it and headed back to campus. The sun was gone, the gray back, and she felt lonely now, the excitement over. She wandered among all the activity, here and there adding buttons to her jacket: BRING THE TROOPS HOME NOW and WAR IS UNHEALTHY FOR CHILDREN AND OTHER LIVING THINGS. She passed on FREE HUEY NEWTON, because she didn't want to have to ask anyone who he was, and was afraid if she wore the button someone might

ask her. She picked up leaflets offering everything from the “real” story behind President Johnson’s refusal to seek a second term to a be-in on the fourth floor of Stevenson North: Leave Your Clothes, Bring Your Grass. She walked among the musical events, keeping an eye out for David’s hat. There were bands, trios, combos, and soloists, with and without instruments, playing every type of protest song. The phrases rang out, “Give Peace a Chance,” “Got to Revolution, Got to Revolution.” She even heard Vida’s clear soprano from the Quad: “Where have all the flowers gone?”

She came over and stood next to Wil to listen to Vida’s calming voice.

“I really need this,” she said to him. “It’s soothing.”

“That’s not the point,” he said. “Didn’t you hear Swanson? There’s a war on. People are dying. Today’s about getting angry and doing something about it.”

She couldn’t believe this was coming from gentle Wil and felt like bursting into tears. She melted back into the crowd as Vida finished her song.

She looked for an open spot so she could escape, but the campus was mobbed. She needed her own moratorium, a postponement so she could figure things out. She finally found a corner on a stone bench next to Anderson Hall and sat down. What was she going to do now? She wanted to go to Washington, but how could she? She knew she should probably dump David, but . . .

“You just sitting here, Judy? With so much going on?”

She looked up, ready to smack whomever it was.

“Come on,” Achilles said with a big grin, pulling her up by the elbow. “There are only two sessions left that are worth anything, and they’re both at the same time. You go to one, and I’ll go to the other. We can compare notes later.”

The moderator turned out to be her teaching assistant from American history. He always said he had gone to school with Jerry Rubin, one of the eight alleged instigators of protests at the 1968 Democratic Convention now being judged at the Chicago Conspiracy Trial. He even looked something like him: chunky, with a full beard and reddish, straggly hair that just missed his shoulders. He always wore the same clothes, jeans with a purple patch on one knee and a fatigue jacket he never took off, even when the room was warm. In her mind, he was also named Jerry.

He was sitting askew on one of the chairs with its attached writing table talking to a group of twenty or so students about the role of guerilla theater at the trial of the Chicago Eight: the defendants blowing kisses to the jury, Abbie Hoffman baring his chest, the North Vietnamese flag on the defense table, the day they all came to court in judges' robes.

"You get why they did that, right?" he asked.

He didn't actually answer the question. No one ever did, Judy realized. You were made to feel like you should already know, so there was really no way to ever find out for sure without making a fool of yourself. Did anyone really know anything?

"I still think they're working against us," said a bold guy in the back row. "They're so outrageous everyone thinks they're nuts, and so everyone against the war must be nuts, too."

"Think back to your American history," Jerry said. "Remember the Boston Tea Party? Taxation without representation? How many of you feel that was justified? Come on, hands up or down."

Nearly everyone raised their hands.

"Well, it might surprise you to know the patriots who threw that party were the Chicago Eight of their time, and that many people thought throwing all that tea in the harbor was the

guerilla theater of 1776,” Jerry said. “Think of it this way, Rubin and crew are pointing out the absurdity of the war’s aggression without representation.”

“But we have representation,” the same guy said.

“Do you? You voting? You don’t look twenty-one. And yet the lottery could send you off to Vietnam. I call that at the very least conscription without representation.”

Judy hadn’t thought of it that way. She was impressed at how good a teacher he was under all the attitude.

“Here’s a fact that should get your attention,” Jerry said. “The life expectancy of an infantryman under fire in Vietnam is six seconds. That’s what the war has come down to, six seconds.”

He looked out at the stunned room.

“I thought it was more like fifteen minutes,” the bold guy spoke up again.

“You looking for all the caveats?” Jerry barked back. “You think fourteen minutes and change is going to matter?”

“None of you gets it, you know. You can go to all the sessions today and talk about whether enlisting or joining ROTC might give you a safer deal, or teaching or going to law school might extend your deferment for a while. But it all boils down to the same thing.

“Read my lips—six seconds. It’s that simple. You get six seconds, you’re outta here. The next guy gets six seconds, and he’s gone and on and on. What difference does it make if you delay it with a deferment? At some point, you’ll be on the line, and you’ll get six fucking seconds. A six-second life doesn’t mean shit. Get it now?”

Jerry stood up, pulling his papers together. He was angry, like Michael and David tried to be. “You can go to all the marches, hear all the speeches, and sing all the songs you want today,

but the lottery's coming, and if your name is drawn, they're going to give you six seconds to live a life." He paused, giving them a sinister smile, then threw a finger in the face of a pale guy in the front row who hadn't yet said a word.

"And if your number is under a hundred, you can kiss it."

The guy reeled back.

Jerry turned to another one, jabbing his chest.

"Six seconds. Tick tock. So, what the hell are you doing *here*?" Then he was out the door.

"Fucking Jesus!" someone said.

"Holy shit."

"Goddamn asshole," someone else said, and Judy noted how God's name taken in vain always made it through when there was nothing left to say.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Judy approached the Quad cautiously, hoping not to be seen, but didn't notice anyone she knew. A huge crowd was milling around, and there were calls that they were moving the Lottery Performance to the lagoon. The sun was low. Golden streaks mixed with shadow limbs, making the crowd appear to be moving as a giant spider, lots of little legs walking quickly, but the overall body advancing at a slow crawl. By the time they arrived at the north edge of the largest finger of the lagoon, darkness had settled in.

The scene they came upon made them hush. On the opposite shore were a dozen people with tall, thick candles. They were standing tall and still, the candles placed just below their chins, lighting their faces with a ghostly glow. The water's reflection magnified their impact, like footlights.

The crowd disassembled, tentacles of dark figures lined up all along the edge of the lagoon, dozens deep. When they were settled, Michael raised a megaphone with his good hand and began to read "The Lottery," by the light of his candle, from Judy's book. The beginning of the story set the scene in an anonymous town gathering for an annual ritual.

After a few minutes of reading, Michael handed the book and the megaphone to Wizard, who took over, read several paragraphs, then passed them on to David, who read about how the children were gathering stones and piling them in the town square.

They progressed through the story, relaying how each of the dutiful townsfolk stuck their hand into a black box and pulled out a piece of paper, one of which would be revealed to have a black mark.

Judy knew all the performers: Vida, Marsha, Achilles, RoMo, Fish, Wil, Sheila, Wizard, and Howie, even Meldrich. They handed the megaphone back and forth again and again among the readers. They *had* needed her.

The crowd listened in respectful silence, the wind sometimes taking the words away when Marsha or RoMo spoke. Then Michael or Meldrich would bring them back with force.

The sentences piled up with horror as the story revealed that this lottery was not for a prize that anyone would want to win.

As they approached the end of the story, the readers signaled their final lines by turning their candles upside down and snuffing them out, disappearing into the dark.

Michael took the megaphone and recited the last paragraph of the story that makes it clear that the one who has drawn the paper with the black mark is to be stoned to death. His broad, clear baritone echoed the length of the lagoon.

Wil reached over to reverse Michael's candle, and the final reflection was sucked into the water as they all stared into darkness. The crowd stood silent in the black, the only illumination from headlights on the highway and high above them from the distant Union Tower.

Later that night, all of the performers were packed into Wizard's room, draped over the bunks, chairs, and most of the floor, passing joints and alternating spoonfuls from a jar of chunky peanut butter with swigs from a half bottle of Southern Comfort. A towel, shoved under the door, kept

the smoke from escaping. It was dark except for the glow from an orange lava light on one of the room's two desks and the periodic flick of lighters.

David sat on the other desk, going on about how significant it was that he had jockeyed the Trots out of leadership of the march. "They'd have blown it," he was saying for at least the third time. "They never would have been able to get all those kids from the Lottery Performance back to the Quad in time for the march."

Fish was flipping through albums next to Meldrich, who was doing a spastic, goofy dance while playing with the stopwatch Achilles had used to time the march so they wouldn't exceed the two-hour permit. Judy had ignored David and was sitting cross-legged on the floor between Vida and Michael.

"That was brilliant, Michael," Judy said—yelled actually, because the stereo was playing an extended scream from a song on one of the Pink Floyd albums. "Where did you get the idea for using the candles like that?"

"Turn it down," Michael said, waiting until he was obeyed before facing Judy. "It's part of the excommunication ceremony the church performed in the Middle Ages. The priests would hold these long, thick candles high as their waists and when the ceremony was over, they'd say the condemned's name, turn the candles over, and snuff them out, damning him forever. I saw it in the movie *Becket*. It hit me as so . . . final. I thought it was appropriate."

He leaned closer to Judy.

"The idea for the candles I got from the movies. But you know the idea for the whole thing I got from you." He gave her a wink, then turned toward Meldrich, who was calling for their attention.

Judy noticed David watching them; so did Vida.

“So, what’s going on with David? Did you finally sleep with him?” Vida whispered in her ear.

“Let’s just say Sally beat me to it.” She started to say more but felt her voice begin to shake.

“The blonde? Big surprise.”

“Yeah, how stupid am I?”

“He’s not worth it,” Vida said and passed her a joint. “Besides, look at him. He’s dying. No one cares about his march; all they’re talking about is your Lottery Performance. I love it.”

“*My* performance?”

Judy was glad when everyone’s attention turned to Meldrich.

“Guess how long?” he cried, waving the stopwatch. “I just timed the scream, guess how long?”

“Four fucking hours,” Fish said.

“I know it seems like that,” Meldrich said, laughing. “But it was only 5.4 minutes, do you believe it, out of an 8.5-minute cut? I know I’m high, but Jesus!” He began giggling uncontrollably.

“Here, I’m gonna hold this hit; time me,” Howie said and inhaled. Marsha rolled her eyes as Meldrich counted.

“Five . . . seven.”

Howie let go, coughing and spitting smoke.

“Let me try,” Achilles said.

“Eight . . . nine. You’re turning blue, man.” Achilles let it out, choking.

“No fair, you made me laugh.”

“I can do better than that. Check me out,” Vida said. She inhaled and exhaled a few times, then sang out a pure clear note.

“Ten . . . twelve. You’re gonna break the record. Keep going. Keep going.” Vida’s eyes got big. She started to pound her thigh and finally ran out of breath.

“Twenty-four seconds. Yes! What else can we time?” Meldrich looked around.

Michael leaned toward Judy again. “Why weren’t you with us at the performance?”

“I’m not much of an out-front person,” she said. “Shy, you know.” She cursed herself for not knowing what to say. She had been waiting for Michael’s attention all this time and now just sounded like an idiot.

“Hmm.” He took a drag of his cigarette and gave her a skeptical look.

“Michael,” Meldrich said, “give me something to time.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Come on, everyone’s got to do something.”

“I’ve got one,” David interrupted. “Let’s time the length of the chorus in ‘Judy Blue Eyes.’ You know, the ‘dew do dew do dew do’ part.”

Judy refused to look at him.

“You got it!” Wizard said, reaching for the album.

When the song began, David came over to sit between Judy and Michael.

“Where were you all day?” he asked. “You just disappeared.”

“At the sessions.”

“All day?”

“There were a lot of them.”

“Swanson do the usual bullshit about how the war started again? You think he’d progress.”

“It doesn’t sound like bullshit yet to me,” Judy said.

David snorted.

She watched him take a long drag off a disappearing roach. He had removed his hat, and his hair kept falling in front of his eyes. Periodically, he flung his head in that way he had. Why did it have to be true that all the cute ones were jerks, especially the cute smart ones?

“Besides,” she added, testing him, “listening to Swanson warmed me up for the march. You really had them tonight.”

He smiled as he held his hit.

She resisted the urge to hum “Mustang Sally.”

“Okay, Judy Blue Eyes,” Meldrich said, “you’re up.”

“No,” she said. “I can’t think of anything.”

“Sure, you can, something with time, seconds.”

She remembered what the TA said earlier in the day, and struggled for an alternative.

“How about a Beatles song?”

“No, sick of music,” Meldrich said. “Something else.”

They were all staring at her.

“All I can think about is something I heard today. It’s nothing. I don’t want to be a downer.”

“No, tell us,” Wil said.

She hesitated. “All right. Did you know that your life expectancy under fire in Vietnam is only six seconds?”

The room went quiet.

“Finally, something worth timing,” Michael said. He grabbed the stopwatch from Meldrich, told Wil to bring the lava light to the center of the floor, then rubbed his hands and spread his arms out like the maharishi.

“Listen carefully,” he said. “Close your eyes. Come on, do it. Picture this. You’re in a jungle, wading through mud, carrying a heavy backpack and a rifle. Suddenly, you hear gunfire. It’s coming at you and you’re done for. This is it, six seconds left to your life. What will you do with it? Go.” He clicked the watch button.

“One second.”

Judy was already there, out of the jungle into a field hospital from one of her mother’s scrapbook photos. A cot was rushed alongside the narrow table. Giant eyes fixed on her above sinking shock-white cheeks. His own foot was in his face. The soldier lifted his head to where his nose nearly touched the sole of his boot.

“Is that my foot?” he screamed.

Judy pushed aside his severed leg and pulled the heavy blanket, saturated scarlet, up to the top of the soldier’s chin. “It’s just your boot,” she said. “They knew you’d need it later.”

“Jesus,” he said, “For a second I thought . . .” His head fell back and he sighed.

“I know.”

He locked all the fingers of his right hand around one of hers.

“Better move him on,” a corpsman said. “We need the space.”

“A second.” Judy put up her free hand.

“You can’t . . .”

She kept her hand up for another second.

“Okay, now.”

The corpsman pulled off the blanket as she disengaged her finger. She rearranged the leg on the cot, putting it back where it belonged. She lifted the soldier’s arms by the elbows and angled her head to motion for the blanket to be returned. She placed the soldier’s arms on top of the blanket and folded his hands high over his chest.

“Six seconds,” Michael said.

She was able to close the soldier’s eyelids just before the explosion.

“Stop.”

Judy came to attention in a room full of faces staring at Michael holding the watch by the orange glow of the light. She was sure he had been observing them, eyes open, the whole time.

“Now tell us, what were you thinking?” he asked. They looked at each other, wondering who would go first. “Meldrich, you.”

“I was thinking about the instant the bullet hit. Splatter, eh?”

No one laughed, and he immediately got serious.

“Do you think it hurts when you’re being blown apart, or does it just . . . happen? You know, do you think you see your own guts flying out of you?”

Judy saw Marsha shake herself.

“Wil?”

“I was watching the lava light,” he said. “It took six seconds for one drop to separate from the blob and move on. It’s like a microcosm. Your life is just the process of being extracted from the collective goo and then drifting off.”

“It was weird,” Wizard said. “I saw the bullet and watched it open up, and then all this shit was coming at me. And then I saw the face of the guy who shot me. It was Swanson, do you believe that? Maybe he really is a spy for the administration.”

“I think it would just be ordinary,” Vida said. “You’d be thinking it should be a big deal, and then it wouldn’t be. It would be about ducking and running, and one second it would just stop.”

“Yeah,” David said. “Just gone.”

“I couldn’t think of a damn thing,” Howie said. “I was waiting for my life to flash before my eyes, but it wouldn’t come. It was nothing. Over, done, nada.”

“Judy, what about you?” Michael asked.

She was still in the tent. She pictured the young soldier’s green eyes, the irises ringed with yellow, rings that had begun to glow so bright the light filled the tent and, in a second, incinerated her life.

“Nothing,” she answered, skirting Michael’s gaze.

“It was like Howie said, nada.”