

*Tomorrow Never Comes tells the story of a surfer who discovers he was drafted during the height of the Vietnam anti-war movement. He then has to make the most difficult decision of his life, which leads him to come of age in 1969 Saigon.*

## **Tomorrow Never Comes: Coming of Age in Saigon 1969** By Robert Boriskin

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# Tomorrow Never Comes

Coming of Age in Saigon 1969



**Robert Boriskin**

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While the book is based on actual events, the author has taken creative liberty with some details to enhance the reader's experience

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## C-22 Tien's Home

I stood at her office fidgeting. I had already approached the door several times without entering. Tien sat in her office typing. She wore a pink floral Áo Dài. She concentrated on her work and didn't notice as I paced back and forth by the open door. Tien was alone, and it was time to act.

I didn't have a plan, but I had decided today was the day I would ask her out. I walked into her office and asked, "Tien, would you like to go to dinner sometime?" I was not sure what I looked like to her. I was so twisted up inside with fear and uncertainty that I was having trouble even walking.

Tien's expression was that of misunderstanding. It was like I was talking in an even more foreign language than English. Tien smiled nicely and went on with her work. It took so much energy to ask the question that I was unwilling to take any more risks and repeat myself. I wondered if she was hurt or mad. Her smile was warm, but she didn't answer me, so I left—more like escaped.

I returned to my desk, confident that everyone in the office could tell something was wrong, yet no one said anything. At other times when I asked Tien questions, she sometimes didn't respond. Questions about her family, especially those that might require an explanation of what had happened to her husband, often received a similar response. But Chase had said, she was interested, and I should ask her out. My uncertainty lingered because I didn't believe I could get a clear answer. The oddest thing was how sweet her smile was. Later that day, I returned to her office with some work, and she behaved as if nothing had happened. By the following day, I was back to visiting as often as possible. Tien reverted to her friendly self, and I resumed enjoying the visits while accepting that my request had not been

accepted. It remained my favorite place to be, so I would spend as much time there as I could.

Three days later, on one of my visits to her office, she said, “Rob, come with me.”

“Okay,” I said, following her into an empty office. She looked behind us and then closed the door. She then turned to me. Tien looked at me with a new tension in her face. I could almost see her heart making it difficult for her to breathe as I struggled with my own breathing.

Tien asked, “You like to come my home?”

“Sure, that would be great. What can I bring?” I said—excited and quicker than was natural.

“You bring nothing; just come my home tomorrow after work, okay?”

“Okay,” I said. Tien’s friendliness was now enhanced by a new directness. She looked at me differently, and I wanted to be close to her.

Tien’s face became flushed, and her hands came up and covered her mouth. “Don’t talk anyone about plans, okay?”

“Okay,” I said as my eyes pleaded for her touch. Tien’s beauty was a distant thing—something to be admired, but not touched, yet now that had changed. Tien’s acceptance changed what she looked like to me, and I recognized a change in how Tien looked at me. It was like Tien was now looking at a man, not a boy. I felt my invitation had awakened in her the need to be appreciated, wanted, and needed as a woman. She delicately kissed me on the lips and then left. My head almost exploded. I had never felt this excited.

During my break the next day, I ran off to the PX to buy candy for the kids and wine for Tien. I returned happy with my purchases and sat at my desk thinking about Tien when she walked in.

“I need talk to you,” she said, and I followed her outside into the open area. When we were far away from others, she turned to me and said, “Not tonight. I tell you when, okay?”

As much as Tien and I talked, there were times when each knew we couldn’t ask why, so I went back to my desk. I was alone with my confusion, fears, sadness, and the emptiness that came from not knowing.

During the six months I had been in Saigon, rockets hit the city almost every night and some days. At first, the rockets made me flinch, but eventually, they became almost like background music. That evening, the sky was lit up with hundreds of explosions. When the bombardment ended, the sky was clear except for the smoke from the fires the rockets caused.

The next day, I went to Tien’s office. I was weak with disappointment. Though I was trying hard to smile, even my smile was weak. Tien also looked sad. Her lips were smiling, but not her eyes. Then, the smile was gone, and she looked almost naked in her sadness. Consumed with disappointment, I was also aware of Tien’s sadness. As I approached, she put her hand to her mouth and ran out of the office. Later, when I returned to check on her, I found out she had left for the day.

I spent another night alone with my emptiness and confusion. That night, the skies were quiet. The rockets came and went almost like waves at surfing beaches. I was thinking about surfing and how storms would cause big waves for a day or two, and then the ocean would return to its gentle rocking.

Two days after the big rocket attack, I went to Tien’s office again. She looked a lot better. Her eyes were bright as if the storm had passed. As soon as Tien saw me, she asked me very nicely to follow her, and once again we went into an empty office.

When we were alone, Tien asked, “Tonight?”



I answered almost before Tien had completed her question, “Tonight would be great!”

Tien quickly said, “Okay, meet at rice stand, down street, after work.”

“Okay, great!”

Tien cautioned, “Don’t talk anyone!”

“No problem. See you after work,” I said. She gently kissed my lips again, but there was more passion this time. She lingered longer, and her hand was on my face. I could feel her lips’ warmth and her hand’s coolness. She then quickly left the room.

This time, I was prepared. I left my office early, making sure the sergeant knew I was going to be gone. Military regulations prohibited me from leaving the hotel at night, and I was hoping I would have the opportunity to violate that regulation. I went upstairs, packed my gifts, got my gun and helmet, and went out to the rice stand.

As I got outside the building, I was bombarded by the usual sounds of the street—the crazy swarm of vehicles and people. I once again noticed that there were no lanes on the street, just many different modes of transportation sharing the space. Most vehicles were going in similar directions on each side of the road, but the chaos was overwhelming. Horns honked, people shouted, and the different combustion engines’ sounds created an oppressive environment. There was also the harsh smell of fuel burning, people perspiring, and all the things being transported. The sides of the street were packed with vendors and children selling everything and anything. I was standing in front of the rice stand when Tien came by.

“Follow me. Not close,” is all she said as she walked by, barely making eye contact.

I followed her at a reasonable distance. Tien was wearing a light blue Áo Dài and walking very cautiously. Less than one hundred yards down the main street, Tien turned into a small alley. The alley was

narrow, and even just a few feet from the street, the world changed. The sounds of traffic quickly disappeared as we continued down the alley. We were now in a residential area. The further down the alley, the more pleasant the sounds and smells became. Children played in small yards, and people talked to each other on landings and in open spaces. Dogs ran around and barked playfully. Each step seemed to change the world around me a little more. I left the hectic traffic, commerce, and smell of the large street to enter a place where people lived, raised families, and cared for each other. This was a neighborhood where people helped each other and enjoyed a good laugh from time to time.

I felt out of place. My gun didn't belong in this community, and my helmet and uniform were an offense to the gentle rhythm of life; they were disturbing.

Tien entered a two-story building. It looked like it had once been a very fancy house, but the vegetation had regained control of the outside. As I entered this old house, I saw the first floor belonged to at least two families. Tien talked to the people at the entrance. This once spacious home was now the residence of several families. Each room had beds on the floor and the personal belongings of the inhabitants. These families gave me a cautious look and then got out of the way as I followed Tien up the stairs. At the top of the stairs was a long room with curtains about two-thirds of the way toward the back. About ten feet past the curtains was another wall that went halfway across the room. Beyond that wall, I could see another space and the outside wall of the building.

Three kids were playing on the floor, and they quickly ran to Tien as she came in the door. They all hugged and kissed, and then the children held tightly to Tien's legs.

Tien looked at me and said, "This is Bao, Jung, and Minh." She looked at her children and said, "My friend, Rob, I tell you. He here for dinner."

Hesitantly, the children said, “Hi Rob.” It was clear they wanted to approach, and I wanted them to. But I was embarrassed and inhibited by my uniform and weapon.

I asked Tien, “Where can I put this stuff?”

“There,” Tien said, pointing to a corner of the room.

I quickly removed my gear, put it in the corner, and came back to where I had been standing. While I was putting my gear away, Tien and her children were standing very still. Tien was in the middle of the room, and her children were still clinging to her.

I stood there now without the encumbrances of war, and my head was hanging low with embarrassment. For what seemed like an eternity, I stood in place. I finally walked up to the children and said, “Hi, it’s great to meet you.”

I was now just a funny-looking American in an ugly green uniform with a candy box in my hands. I handed the children the candy and said, “Your mom has been telling me about you.” For the kids and me, the transition was over. We sat down on the floor and began talking. What was most interesting to them were my hairy arms. As they felt them with their tiny fingers, they giggled quietly. Her children were very bright and spoke English much better than I spoke Vietnamese. They showed me around their apartment, thanked me for the gifts from Hawaii, and talked about what they did. I was only entertaining for about ten minutes, and then they wanted to be excused to go outside to play.

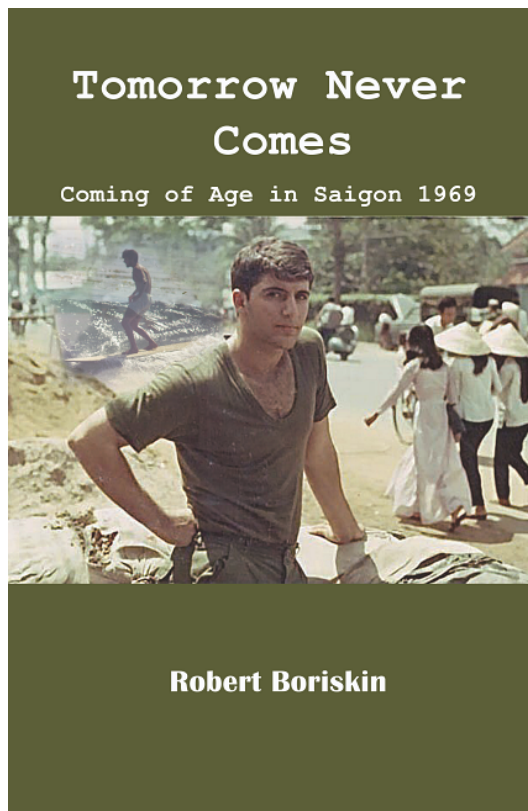
Dinner was simple but enjoyable: vegetables, rice, and fish that filled the room with a sweet aroma. The dishes were washed in the shower, which I found out was also the toilet. After dinner, the children cleared the dishes and were sent to their beds to sleep. Their beds were no more than ten feet from Tien’s bed, separated only by a curtain.

As the evening progressed, the sounds of the people living around Tien’s house slowly became quiet. I heard the other families

having dinner and talking earlier in the evening. Then, I heard them cleaning up. Eventually, the talk subsided. Outside, there were whispers as the community retired for the evening. It was a slow and natural process, disturbed now and then by babies crying and others having trouble getting ready for sleep. I had left a chaotic world to join a peaceful, loving one, and the people in that world accepted me. Tien's children were drifting off to sleep.

I had been in the service for almost a year, and in all that time, I felt tightness—a sense of disconnection and aloneness, except for my short leave before coming to Vietnam and the time in Hawaii. Tonight, I felt at home in a house where people were unafraid to care about each other. I felt part of a family.

It was getting dark outside, and I needed to decide whether to return to the hotel, so I asked Tien, “Can I stay, or should I leave now?”



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