

KARMIC MORTGAGE

Time is surely the strangest element in our lives. Its passage rendered only fleeting bits of our stay in paradise. I was due in the delta, where it waited for no one. Our nights of love and days of wandering naked slipped by like the tide that inched me up the Mekong, while my child bride frolicked as if no end would come.

When it did, the Jeep's battery was dead and we had to trek ten miles across a lava flow, halfway up the volcano's slope, where it turned green and the ranch mechanic waited. Sure, the thought passed, "Why leave at all?" When she blurted it out I stopped in my tracks incensed with her simplistic viewpoint! We argued in that uncompromising wasteland over issues great and small, gaining no further agreement than her commitment to follow rather than wait alone.

It was as if Lord Jim questioned aloud why he needed to meet his spear. Interactors couldn't do such a thing! In real life, diddling with outcome was impossible. Why do men kill each other? Why did we leave the Garden in the first place? These are not matters easily settled. With the clock running and battery dead, I had to get a move on. I was driven! I didn't wanna be a hero, cared less about bravery, and really didn't have a clue what the calling was all about. I just had to be there, like a junkie needs his fix.

Did she notice by my pace that I hurried in some poorly disguised eagerness? I can't remember my answer, and it was probably a lie...more crap about leading us through hell to an earned state of grace, enlarged with painted promises of adventure in the orient. We fled paradise together to the other end of the rainbow.

It was a walled-in garden this time, not exactly Eden but good enough, which belonged to a wealthy Thai friend. She loved it from first sight and scurried about fixing up her "mouse house," to which "Kerry Kat" would commute from his office in the nine-to-five war. In the morning I hopped a C-130 from Utapao and was aboard by lunch, relieved to be home and away from her knowing gaze.

The Nez looked like new. Ben and Juan smiled to see I appreciated their work. The Marines were gone. Henry had a paperback stuck to his face, so I plugged in the new stereo, put Bob Dylan on, and by late afternoon we were pulling 600 tons of silver napalm cannisters and clustered barrels of chemicals up the coast to Phan Rang. The salt air cleared my thoughts as I surveyed the horizon, pleased with our release from the river's clutches for the moment.

I mused on the military madness of our Cambodia supply

project, becoming enraged like Jack at Tuy Hoa as I realized how expendable we'd been on that test run. I had an inkling that soon they'd send great piles of gravel and more secret orders. A new jet I'd never seen before swooped near and fired a volley of rockets at a jagged island off to starboard, disintegrating it in a profound diatribe to our meaningless presence there. I farted and gazed ahead.

Up and down the coast we trudged, our sole excitement changes in the weather. One day in that war, I saved our government the entire \$90,000 they paid me, pulling an LST from certain destruction off a reef in high surf. Henry held the Nez off while I swam a small line to the Koreans, as their doomed vessel ground in death throes, tilting precariously in a rising shorebreak. While fifty of 'em heave-hoed a big hawser off our rig, I discovered a braided wire wrapped in their propeller.

Balanced on the rudder strut, I shouted up directions as they backed down their driveshaft manually with giant pipe wrenches. I thrived on that sort of thing and stood like Ahab on the whale as ten-foot waves broke over me and wire cut my hands. It made me feel alive in what had otherwise become a dull job. As a result of saving them, beyond the line and ice cream they gave us, about two-hundred of their grateful soldiers knew my face. Everywhere I went after that Koreans took care of me...and they were about the baddest mutha's we ever hired to do our dirty work anywhere!

I'd catch helicopters, Caribous, Providers, or big Hercules transports out to three American airbases in Thailand, finding my way to Kela whenever I could. She was having all sorts of problems with Thai Immigration, and had to take the train 600 miles north to Laos once a month in order to leave the country and reenter with a new visa.

Her stories of the friendly little people there and a job teaching English for USAID prompted us to shift her base. It would be harder for me to visit, as the place was crawling with CIA boogymen guarding their little fiefdom from a spillover of carpetbaggers like myself. All sorts were trying to keep their women within range of the profit-taking by this time. There was also a savage drug-ring run by the spooks and Air America, making millions, but I didn't know.

The Tet offensive was underway as I recognized the changing face of the conflict, knowing I'd never regain what I'd found with Meers and the SEAL team up the river. One night, a gross pain in my heart left me thinking Hatch had finally met his match, cornered by a whole batallion in a granite valley. It was so clear I woke with a start and went topside to meditate, but with Billy's spirit up there all I did was open up with the AK, blowing the skulls to chips and splinters. I knew it wasn't a dream...

Adventure slipped away at an increasing rate, turning what had been excess into banality, a simple work-a-day proposition. Authority and repetition stripped the thrill of

individual accomplishment, and although I loved the ocean, being at sea kept me from my maverick pals. I waited for them with my weapons, black pajamas, and string of ears...but they never came again.

As I sailed the night ocean, thinking of horror so close yet now far, a grave realization overcame me. I didn't wanna be death's partner any more, and wondered if Meers was right about my dark side and being his twin. I recoiled physically from our savagery. The country lay in moonlight just beyond the twinkling fishing fleet as I pulled my heavy load to its lethal destiny, but now I wanted to make up for the past or do something about the ecocide being levied on this poor agricultural society.

Being with Kela had bouyed up my farmer nature, and God knew I should not be delivery boy of such dreadful cargo to sterilize the good earth. Even the Geneva Convention disallowed destroying a nation's food source, but our wizards skirted that without a blink, marking all the C-123's with ARVN codes and putting Vietnamese pilots on board some of the spray planes. You couldn't out think double-think.

It was similar to having me go into Cambodia, since I didn't exist and still don't. I knew I'd leave soon. I didn't need to be a part of destroying this country in order to save it. Leaflets fluttered onto our decks with B-52's on one side and encouragement to come to the protected New Hamlets on the other. The targets of this propaganda had family plots with ancestors to worship, necromancers to harmonize crops and land, and most had never moved five miles in their lifetime. How could they get up and leave?

The next batch showed planes spraying, with explanations: "Set your mind at ease, no harm to you, only deny food to your enemy...come to the new agrovilles without fear!" I knew better, for when Tiny and I had gone to the Resource Denial Office we'd seen a large Smokey the Bear over the door with a cryptic slogan, "Only We Can Prevent Forests." It was sick humor...we were gonna turn the whole place into a parking lot.

In retrospect, it's almost beyond me, what we did. How many did Calley kill at My Lai, twenty-three? Christ, some of the villages I took out with a mere hiss in my microphone held more than a thousand! We flew five and a half million sorties, defoliated six-million acres of forest, killing all the animals except big cats and boars, destroyed the entire mangrove system which held the fragile delta together, as well a million acres of rice paddies, and left twenty-five million huge bomb craters. It was awesome all right, four-hundred times the tonnage dropped on Japan, and more than in all the world wars...with victory just ahead.

As what we were doing dawned on me, I wracked my mind for a solution, but could find none. So I just drove the boat, excusing it as destiny's doing, and tried to avoid the moral issue ripping me in half. I wondered whether I missed

Meers or despised him, and looked on helplessly, full-knowing I'd pay the rest of my life for my part as his brother in arms...a dark angel who'd crossed the line once and forever. On the ocean my overview grew, almost strangling me in revulsion. In the beginning, with missionary zeal and my cup of LSD I'd come to turn the tide of war...drowned at the end after holding resolutely with Jack, Hatcher, and Meers, who agreed "Cry havoc...and let slip the dogs of war!"

Tom called from the North, where Tet panic was raging, with a comment on the times. ARVN pilots were landing their helicopters full of terrified troops on top of his barge which was loaded with women and children. Whirling blades cut swathes through the huddled humanity. Then these freaks shot their own people and shoved them and the helicopters overboard. One after another landed as if they were on American soil already! Maybe they assumed we needed their type to fill out our ethnic fabric.

Dollars to donuts they run the crack trade today, along with the assorted "wunderkind" Fidel sent us! Tom did the right thing, towing them into the gulfstream on a course for Antarctica. He cut these cowboys loose with an acetylene torch, dropping 2,000 feet of wire in the process, whereupon they emptied their weapons at him in salute! He sailed off to Saudi Arabia...just up and left the war like we should'a done long ago, for we had its best years in '65 and '66.

More disgusted by the day, I waited for the real men I'd known to emerge somehow. Instead, Saigon sent an alternate captain and crew, ordering us to Phan Rang as double-shift harbor tug with a timeclock, beach accommodations, and even PX privileges! The end was near. It probably seems a small thing, but when that pompous bastard cut the scrotums off, I packed my weapons and disappeared like I'd come...without a trace.

The old Nez knew it was time too, and only held out a few more months. Resting now in her watery grave, she remembers the footsteps of my youth, and most real moments of my life...solitary witness to my metamorphosis from snipe hunter at the mail bouy to killer on the river.