

## THE HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

The last attempt in my stratagem to jostle the natural order of things faded into some kind of dream in an old whorehouse on a murky river running through Singapore. It was there, amidst a raucous and bawdy spectrum of humanity, engulfed in acrid fumes of opium, hashish, and marijuana that those untouchable concepts of time and space, God and love, life and death, and how this all could be, caught up with me.

I remember as if it was this moment...patterns in the tile floor, dragons and colored snakes wriggling through my very being, and infinite meaning in the tiniest nuance of everything around me. The song, "House of the Rising Sun," was droning in the distance as a pipe reached my hand, and just like that I was initiated into the heightened states of consciousness I'd been seeking all along. Its heartbeat seemed nearer now than ever before.

There was no indoctrination or explanation, no road map or reluctance, not even an invitation. With my first inhalation of smoke, I was exposed to forever for a fraction of a second. Was I destined for this, born one of the candidates on some soul-searching voyage? Did I drink the mystic deliria deeper than others from birth, my curiosity leading me blindly on this endless quest for more, or was I just ripe for its coming like so many my age? Swept away without answers only the song echoed on.

It seemed moments ago I was young and indestructible. Now an indeterminate depth appalled me, and performing the meagerest part in its drama produced only fear. The cocky prankster disintegrated, and I was left exposed, an initiate with nothing to fall back on, and the unfathomable mystery of existence directly before me.

This only happened to some, for Zander just laughed, seeing and hearing things that "weren't really there," and generally enjoying his first dope-smoking encounter. He woke bright and bushy-tailed, ready to push on the next morning as if nothing had happened. I peered out quite differently with dewy eyes on an altered world of boundless dimension, now delivering through my numbness a foggy awareness of eternity. It wasn't about to pass like a rain squall or some fit of indigestion...I was sure of this much.

Everything was so ancient and charged with significance. What bothered me most was I recognized it as if I were privy to a canny puzzle, which seemed to fit, piece by piece, into a conundrum without end. Shrines and monasteries in the jungle reeked of timelessness far beyond my own, and I shivered before its ever-changing forms. The hollow eyes of monks, their monotonous chanting of aum, and a musty odor from countless ages of worship were so hauntingly familiar

that I shuddered as their prescience grew on me like some incurable leprosy.

Halfway up the Malaysian Peninsula at Ipoh was a temple built inside a mountain. In eerie darkness and hand-carved lakes swam immense turtles, left by their monastic counterparts centuries ago. They were painted with names and dates. Whispering with the Druid-like priests who chanted to them in pathworn circles around cold pools, I tried to find who the turtle spirits were.

It seriously affected me, but Zander took a flash photo and wandered out to play with the monkeys. Hardy would've probably let them all go and looted the offering bowl. I smoked some hash and crouched in shimmering reflections, watching the ancient beasts surface to hiss in the silver hush of their stone cathedral. The bastions of antiquity held secrets it was gonna take time to unravel, more than I could muster on this first go 'round, or maybe even this lifetime.

Big cities were nearly impassable now, and my skateboard no longer an option. In Bangkok, amidst choking fumes and scurrying crowds, I fell into severe culture shock and frantically sought sanctuary like a reclusive ascetic to salvage my sanity. The ornate temple complex at Wat Po housed the reclining Buddha, a hundred feet long. Gilt statues of him were everywhere. Monks in shades of saffron performed rituals day and night. It seemed an ongoing rerun...I'd been here before! Perhaps it was the familiar patterns in nature reflected in man's art.

Continuing north towards the Burmese border, we joined a water festival at Chiang Mai. Perfect timing it was, for the most beautiful girls from all over Thailand came to parade, and, in curious custom, throw water at each other. Of course, we introduced the water balloon, and soon everyone was throwing them, even scoring a direct hit on the Mayor's float. Everyone was laughing. I loved the Thais, they had such childlike humor, and playing there was an interlude from spiritual pursuits. Or was I being pursued?

Even more mysterious were the Meo hill tribes we found further north in the mountains, above the king's old summer palace. We followed terraced hillsides and a bamboo aquaduct to the valley floor concealed in mist a mile below. Clutching biomass nearly filtered out the light of day, yet still this fragile pipeline trickled delicately from branch to branch, down to the little people who grew the Golden Crescent's most infamous product, last of God's gifts, the opium poppy.

Smugglers warred here, and government agents waylaid runners in the mountain passes, so we didn't stay long. Smoking with the village elders, I got so messed up Zander had to drag me out of there. He was beginning to realize my quest was considerably different from his.

We entered Cambodia riding on top of a rickety bus,

accompanied by trussed and protesting pigs and a fluttering tangle of chickens secured by a string. When we weren't preoccupied with staying aboard, we'd catch fleeting glimpses of gigantic, four-sided faces carved in stone, towering above the jungle. Miles around lay ruins of the Khmer civilization of Angkor Wat. We skateboarded along asphalt footpaths past French archaeologists trying to reconstruct the massive monoliths, dragons, and murals.

The trees themselves had other plans, their trunks interlocked around the huge heads, defying gravity to lift them piece by piece into the air. The damage from ages of war and abandon was apparent everywhere, man's ability for destruction keeping pace with the elements. Years of looting had left their mark, with most of the heads knocked off, but the Khmer's primeval message lingered on nonetheless.

An intricate system of granite moats still kept water from temple footings, and the entire layout was directed by azimuths of planets and stars. No one knew what the lost civilization was trying to say or why they'd disappeared without a trace. I shivered as I had in the mountain cavern when the turtles winked at me. Good God, how long had we been at this, and toward what end?