

GOD'S SECRET HIDING PLACE

I stood outside Kela's classroom with some mongrel Laotian hounds, listening to her monks, policemen, and civil servants as they chanted "see spot run." I saw her eyes flash as she realized I wouldn't be leaving this time. Walking past the colorful central market along a tree-lined avenue with a French name, we babbled about our exciting life together. It appeared happiness was the order of the day.

Vientiane was a fine place to start, a simple setting, and her little bungalow in Dong Palane, the red light district, was our first real home. She'd decorated it with tapestries from Meo hill tribes, Thai silk, and Cambodian temple rubbings. Tiny brass lamps flickered and the smell of incense perfumed the air, as a beautiful blend of flutes harmonized through the village.

From the outset, I seemed her guest in a fantasy world...like I'd joined Alice in a curiouser and curiouser wonderland. Maybe it was the stream of exotic hippies who came knocking 'til midnight. I wasn't exactly accustomed to company, and kept reaching for the Colt while trying to appear sociable on the surface. I tried adjusting to her reality, knowing how gregarious she was, but finally realized one couldn't put a beautiful woman in a hut alone and expect her to read the whole time.

It took a few days to meet all the characters in her charade, and a bit more to decide these bozos were at the highest stage of their evolution and drug consumption. The product of Leary's "Turn on, tune in, drop out" revolution, they'd shed their egos like old raincoats, and, following the "clear light," were on the path to infinity. It looked more like nowhere to me...kinda like bugs around a light bulb.

They made me nervous from the start, and downright uncomfortable as time went on. Everyone was really into the "now," stoned all the time on the incredibly powerful dope available for pennies, and even ridiculed my pursuit of material things and plans for the future.

The real shit of it was, she was becoming one of them! I was hung up in reality, carried a gun, and was definitely on the outside of her kooky circle of contemporaries. At first I felt like douching some of these dorks and putting their skulls outside my hootch, this becoming an urge to leave her, finally coming full circle to feeling wrong and left out.

So I tried adjusting my perceptions to join them in celebrating life in the moment, but just couldn't make it. I'd become responsible for inscrutable action in encounters with death, where my methods, bizarre or not, had worked quite well. Now it seemed I must drop my control, surrender

to something beyond my grasp, or basically terminate my command. The more psychedelics I took, the more confused things got. Maybe what they all told her was right...I was just too uptight. Of course, I'd come from a considerably different tribe. If Meers knew of this clusterfuck he'd call an airstrike without question, then write it off as a coordinate error.

I wandered alone through temples and small farms along the river, wondering where I fit into the puzzle. My favorite refuge became a thin sliver of an island floating in the Mekong's timeless currents. I found incremental peace of mind there, and time to review and weigh my values, as well the profound truths that awesome mentors had taught me. The present remained a crucial issue, as I had to deal with my wife's reality rather than the past. There'd be time for that later...

It wasn't the drugged state of this hippie world that irked me. Their lack of purpose, plan, and stance was what made them losers in my eye. All they did most days was sit in Mr. Lee's coffee shop and mutter, then by nightfall most passed out...little of import ever really said or done. Christ, I was a driven man on a mission from God, and this had lent credence to my actions in that gruesome killing field, where the rites of manhood had been infused in my soul like hot steel in a bucket of blood. I hadn't been beyond that unwritten code a day when I ran into a reality I didn't respect and a woman who'd shifted values on me. What the fuck, over?

I tried to shake the memory of 'Nam, but the lessons of responsibility and chain of command were too great...the men who'd counted on me and those I'd trusted with my life rose up and winked at me. Unh, uh, I wouldn't go into the bush with any of the stony nerds here! I would remain captain of my soul as I'd been there, and these dreamers could take their free love and peace now doo doo and shove it!

I went up to the bow to watch the river part around my imaginary vessel. The two families who farmed the island crossed the rickety bridge to the mainland, carrying their vegetables on poles as I crept barefoot in the shadows of their ganja patch. Alone on her, sailing that great artery out of China, I believed in myself without distraction. Star-shaped leaves of marijuana let the sun twinkle down on me as they swayed on tall stalks overhead, and insects droned in a profusion of flowers at the headland. I sat on the prow of my present for what might have been weeks, plotting an acceptable course.

Several months went by as I tried to adjust to life without the Nez, waiting for a mission, wondering who I was. I'd ride my motorcycle far into the Laotian countryside in search of something, but it wasn't God and I found nothing. I took to hanging out with some Pathet Lao guards at their embassy near the central market, working on my AK with them

in their courtyard as they cleaned theirs. It seemed logical to get to know these guys. Like all the slimeballs in history, they'd more than likely be the sole survivors.

I was so sensitive and mixed up inside that their jokes and marching back and forth couldn't carry me far. Anyway, per Kela's instructions, I was supposed to be working on suppressing the macho side of my dual nature, rather than cultivating it. So I spent some time in a temple with an old monk and his pet monkey, these two being almost indistinguishable from each other. The monkey emulated his master down to a wrinkle and frown, and we held a fine discourse on the evolution of species and other appropriate topics. Then adversity struck our little community and I rose to meet it.

Dr. Sheldon Cholst, once famous New York psychiatrist and counselor to the stars, was self-proclaimed guru to the groupies gathered at this far waystation. About sixty and suffering in the final stage of terminal syphilis, he was whacked-out all the time on China White, the pure heroin it seems the CIA controlled. He was a brilliant man, and I loved listening to him as I bandaged the gaping, ulcerous hole at the base of his spine. Maybe his methods were unsound, but his unique state of mind and decaying body differentiated him from the losers who followed him.

The village woke to find one of his disciples dead of an overdose, and the local police, accompanied by a CIA team from USAID, swarmed in to find out what we were all up to. I piled Kela on the back of my old BSA and headed south to spend a few days with Mike and Susan, some Peace Corps volunteers we'd met who were teaching agriculture in a remote village near Saravane. My quick action kept us from the ensuing investigation, and the wind on my face as we meandered along the river assured me I was right. She was gonna have to realize that her beloved bongo players were going nowhere.

I told Mike how difficult it was for me to buy Leary's tune on ego loss and dropping one's old personality as well as value system. We talked about young Americans wandering without names throughout Asia, seeking Nirvana. He agreed with me and described other communities of the lost tribe we'd find across the world, the most far-out in Katmandu, Nepal. Our generation's consciousness was being altered faster than any of us could follow, and he, too, was concerned with the casualty rate.

We shared a strong family background, and thought maybe the missing souls were searching for God the Father when their "father the god" failed. Our own fears abated by agreement, we could only guess where the winds of chemical change would blow our homeless brethren. We rocked on his porch, listening to the electric whir of crickets, feeling the pulse of our times in as exact an understanding as I'd experienced with my ring of killers. It made us both sane

for the moment.

We planned another meeting the following week when we'd drop some of my acid together. The wee hours wound down in mutual visions of a communal farm and several couples, self-sufficient on the fringe of madness that would surely invade the inner cities. It helped to know there was someone else with that foresight. What had begun as magic was quickly running amok.

He never got that far. A few days later, the Pathet Lao hung Mike and Susan's heads over the well he'd dug. Sickened by the news, I prepared to drag Kela outta there. After registering my feelings with the asshole guerillas I'd befriended, nearly causing an international incident in the process, I realized there was nothing I could do to change this place short of moving, which I'd decided already. Too bad, it was a lovely little country.

Consulting with Shelley, waiting for his lucid moments, I got some encouragement. He felt I was on the right track with my farm, although he emphatically believed that chemicals were dispensed by God to help us find Him. He speculated that harsh drug laws in the U.S. would soon create powerful criminal distribution systems and mass destruction amongst the young. He rambled a lot that last night with me, as if he knew his end would accelerate with my parting. I waited for his gems and pieced this storytale together...

"Once upon a time, God lived on earth among us, but we pestered Him so much about the secret of life that He decided to hide. He liked being around and decided against leaving altogether. First He was gonna conceal Himself on Mount Everest, but knew someone like Hillary would find Him, and thinking of the moon, easily foresaw astronauts showing up. There seemed no place we seekers would not bother Him, and then a brilliant thought occurred. He hid Himself inside man's mind, and there enjoys peace while we scurry about searching for that which we cannot find beyond ourselves."

Shelley laughed, "So you see, He's never been missing!" Smiling at me, he booted a little blood back into the syringe, and tapping his head grinned, "He's in here, man, right here."

I saw myself in his mirror behind the flickering candle which had melted over an old skull, and a mixture of emotion played on my face. I held a fear of the needle, and an equal curiosity of heroin's capabilities to take you from pain, should it become too great as in his case. Mama-san came twice daily with his supplies, and I'd spent a few days on some opium she'd prepared for me. She was a master, and I enjoyed her twinkling persona, the dope, neat little trays of food, and ever-present candy bar hidden under a napkin. For a terminal situation, this was as good as it would get. For a moment, I felt myself older, crushed by grave circumstance, there in his place...and its reality spooked me more than most visions in my life.

So I'd met two men in Laos I could understand, and they were like shooting stars, gone before I could know them. If the temple of God was really man's body, Shelley was short on time to worship in...and Mike had flat run out. The whole country seemed "short" and a profound urgency worked in me to move on. Kela and I boxed our treasures, adding ten pounds of ganja, the potent Laotian marijuana, and shipped the lot of it out through the APO or Armed Services Post Office as government employees.

I could've shipped more, but was nervous about the AK, M-3, grenades, and thousands of rounds of ammo wrapped in our clothes and surrounded by books. All the way outta there, I worried my string of ears and other grisly souvenirs would be smelled in the mail, but as we crossed the Mekong and left that little country behind, I knew without a doubt I'd be back. The lilting harmonics of multi-reed flutes, called "cans," followed us across the river and stuck in my memory.

We got off the train north of Bangkok and turned left toward Cambodia. By nightfall we were ensconced in the Hotel Independence at Siem Riep, surrounded once again by the towering faces of Angkor Wat's sentinels. Kela wanted to take acid in the main temple, but the night crackled with gunfire, and shadows of parachuting flares told me it wasn't a great idea. The best we could do was tour in daylight, peering into the jungle with fleeting apprehension. I noticed French archeologists packing up, and even the hippies were scrambling like rats off a sinking ship. Cambodia's lifespan was measured in heartbeats as the war spread like a pestilence across the land.

We moved with the stream of refugees south to Phnom Penh, where we got caught in a real close call. Huge crowds gathered around a truck with an American plane complete with broken bodies, and near the USIS library a monk lit himself on fire as the crowd tore the building apart. Speaking French and backing away, I kept one hand on the Colt and the other around Kela as we inched through the masses, dodging typewriters, books, and pictures of Richard Nixon. Shit, I should have been welcomed as a national hero after bringing the Nez into their desparate town, but I held my mug and swallowed my pride. Life was always so delicately balanced in that part of the world.

What really upset me was the movie billboard that caught my eye during our pressed exit. There, naked in the arms of some Chinese hero, was Birte, tutor of my youth in the art of love! So that's what she was doing in China. Wow, I wanted to see that movie bad enough to brave the angry mobs, but Kela would have none of it, so we hauled ass for the border, crouched low in a speeding taxi with a wad of money in one hand and cocked weapon in the other.