

THE FLASHCARD SMUGGLER

It was an unworldly reunion. Thousand-foot dunes and gigantic antennae dwarfed the little plane, as Souvat and I watched the pilot kick his soccer ball in the mirage before us. We might as well have met on Saturn, and I envisioned giant worms burrowing the white swells of sand around us. As we talked of new dangers in his country, it all began to crawl on me again. Maybe I should give up, go home, and be normal. The ocean stretched away from us, through jungles of Borneo and New Guinea, into the Mekong, and right up to my tiny island with its starry ganja patch.

I looked at Souvat. He had tears in his eyes, knowing this was the last trip. No matter how it went, he'd never see me again...his family perhaps as well. The war swallowed the past and was eating at the future, even now, as we sat trying to grasp our place in the shifting sands of political fortune. He whispered then, "They are all your enemies. This time they will kill you if they can." It was true. The fortune in my pouch made me the number-one target there.

We spent the night in the blockhouse under scanning feelers, groping at the edge of space, and drew flashcards in several languages to cover every evil we could think of. We rolled off our stools, laughing at "Take me to your leader." Some were threatening, like, "Do what I say or die" while a few were just for fun. Souvat thought his brother would love, "You like white pussy?"

Morning came in somber tones, and time wasn't waiting for enemies or allies. Everyone in Laos was looking for a way out, and anyone who couldn't act from instinct without evaluation was finished in a heartbeat. I left my spiritual compatriot in that remoteness...and carrying personal farewells to his family headed for the epicenter of horror with a handful of little cards drawn by his caring hands to protect me. His eyes, I'll always have them to remind me of the years we made our magic in.

I couldn't believe how inviting Karena looked by the pool at the Erawan. I inhaled six vodkas, swam a little, and then spent a long time in bed with her. I didn't bother explaining what an odyssey this was becoming. By the time it was over she'd hardly realize what countries she'd been in. It was better for her to just enjoy the tour, and know only what she needed.

We headed north in a taxi as I gave her bits of instruction--like we'd have to lie down in the boat 'cause Commies liked white girls--but on the other side was the best dope in the world, her favorite part of the story. I was gonna tell her how Laos was landlocked by six countries and was the key to Asia, but skipped that, too.

The crossing went smoothly, and she stayed in the grounded steamer while I went for Pratee and his truck. Mama-san loved Karena and vice versa, you can be sure, so I had to arrange that she had no stash of her own and whipped out the letter from Souvat covering that delicate issue. They loved the family-oriented flashcards which Souvat had made up for fun.

I retrieved my box of tricks from the storeroom, got Karena settled into a bungalow in Dong Palane, and went to the coffee shop, which had been the center for young seekers a few years back. Old Mr. Lee was still chopping vegetables, smiling through his gold teeth, and giving off the best vibes in that part of the world. I gathered that most of the hippies had fled. The war was about to swallow the town at any moment. He was still the same, and we talked of better times when his place overflowed with laughter and music.

He seemed saddened by the memories, so I changed the subject and caught up on local news and USAID operations. I was pleased to find that weird dude, Ogilvie, was still running the Handicraft Mission. He'd long been my target in a farfetched scheme I'd attempt here when my mysterious appearance would cause alarm at the Army Post Office. I'd never met the guy, but from Kela's description he was a dream come true.

Mr. Lee warned me of an evil CIA man staying sometimes in the bungalows with his whore, and I paid him well for this advice, bowed, and wandered back to our room. As I was walking up the dirt lane between the thatched huts, I spotted a baldheaded man with silver glasses, the kind you can't see into, as he slithered through a doorway. Whoa, that was the spook, and right next to us!

I went straight to the manager, and after reviewing the old days, moved to the last bungalow near the Buddhist Temple, and away from that cretin. Pratee came at sunset and we went to Mama-san's to get on with the business at hand. Karena shot some heroin while I inspected the mountain in the storeroom. Everyday they'd turned and aired it, and now it was ready, a giant pile worth more than gold.

I laid out the letter and flashcards for Pratee. He picked my favorite card and flipped it on me in English, "You have a good soul!" Then he shook my hand, put his arm around my shoulder, and smiled that deep concern of the little people who only wanted peace for the world. We were gonna pull this off...spooks, Pathet Lao, and armies of the titans notwithstanding.

The town was pretty shaky, and invisible eyes followed me everywhere, for there were no young people left. What was I thinking? I turned back to redress Karena...my version of sexy dresses and princely pomp wouldn't fly in this war-torn village. I put on my first disguise and could barely recognize myself in the mirror, got Karena into some hot pants and a silk blouse that barely held her nipples in, and

we set out.

We cruised the USAID Compound, library, bar, and the pool, as I pointed out exits and entries to her. I saw no familiar faces. Heading to the Mission in a taxi, I briefed her on the plan. She was to buy everything Ogilvie would sell her...all the while hanging her perfect tits in his face. Kela had mentioned this sex-starved Civil Servant to me, and his continual pathetic passes at her had set the stage to use man's weakest sense to accomplish my goal. He was gonna mail the ganja for her and never know he'd done it.

I didn't spend much time there, but made it clear to him she was free to buy whatever she liked as I had business elsewhere in the country, hinting of Luang Prabang in the north. Karena let him know I fancied Asian ladies, and left her in every town to spend my fabulous wealth as she saw fit while I searched for the most exotic women in the land. He took her to lunch and dropped her at the town's fanciest hotel, as planned.

Pratee chauffeured Karena everyday at ten in the morning and picked her up at Ogilvie's house in the evening. Ogilvie was falling perfectly into the trap and soon, to his great satisfaction, would be her lover. I boxed and fiberglassed the days away. Three days in a row we clocked the APO mail out of the post office and the exact time of the military flight's lift-off. Every night stories of Ogilvie's sexual capers held me in stitches. She thought it might be the first time he'd ever had a blow job!

Her pile of purchased art grew, and each night as Pratee put them away, he shook his head at the price tags, indicating he could get it for a fifth the cost. How could I explain the pile was what Ogilvie must believe he'd be mailing? I pulled out the flashcard that read, "Do not wait, follow me," and laughed. The absurd fact I was insulated by the system itself initiated the laugh more than Pratee's look. I imagined Tiny sending choppers to lift me out of a real jam, for I knew he would. I'd learned this from Meers. Always have another way out.

We drove in a government sedan, borrowed from the motorpool ostensibly for a test drive, to the GAO shipping office, I stepped out officiously with the disguise on and a thin briefcase at my side. It was almost time for the warehouse to close for the day, but the manager was willing to listen. Exactly nineteen hours and the scenario would be complete. There was no charge for these government house movers, and it mattered little to me whether this innocuous load of Laotian and Meo artwork ever got there. The stuff might go by boat...the method was just too slow for dope.

I flashed my military ID and joked with the manager about the task of boxing three year-old remains, while he reviewed the complex pile of bullshit Tiny'd dreamed up for him. I hinted at discretion for the relatives' sake. I told him we'd bring the load in the morning and take it from

there. Pratee opened the car door for me in a dignified exit, and we headed for the Compound to put the sedan back before it was missed. I got out across from the APO building and stood for a few, silent moments in the shadowed alley, where I would observe Karena's debut as a crisis actress the following morning. I felt positive then...but it didn't last.

The spook's shutter blinked when she came home that night. I wondered if it was coke-induced paranoia, but Karena said he'd watched her at lunch by the pool with Ogilvie. I allowed myself to sink into a malevolent fit, and weighed it all again. Ogilvie was in seventh heaven and had agreed to mail her treasures...so what could go wrong? I suspected the CIA had run low on subjects, or maybe Karena turned him on, but his sinister apparition kept rising from my meditations. I got up in the middle of the night, went over the whole thing again, still unable to spot the flaw inherent in the complex scheme. Meers would've slit the spook's throat without a thought...but I was unsure that was necessary yet.

I emphasized to her that she had to keep Ogilvie occupied until 1:15 when the mail plane lifted out of Vientiane. I drew a hurried map of the restaurant, toilets, and pool area so she'd know where to run, if it came to that. Once in the lady's room she could emerge by the pool and go through the one-way fire door out to the taxi stand. I tried not to insinuate we might get separated, but gave her an emergency packet with flashcards and money to escape the country. I smelled that fear I'd known in the jungle with Meers. Where was it coming from?

We checked our watches and went into action. Dropping her off for the last performance with Ogilvie, Pratee and I scurried to Mama-san's for the crates of artifacts, and drove out to meet the GAO man. I kept an eye on my watch as he helped Pratee stack the pallet. Then I thought of a back-up plan which was gonna be worth \$420,000 ninety minutes from its inception. I asked the manager to wait for me at noon for lunch, and he agreed.

We drove back to Mama-san's storeroom, and loaded the real boxes--fifteen seventy-pound time bombs--then headed for Ogilvie's via the APO, where I got out. Parts of what followed I got from Karena during our frantic exit from that world, and some I observed in abject terror from my vantage point near the motorpool. Pratee stopped at the mission, honking his horn at exactly 11:22, and she says Ogilvie turned white the moment he saw the load. They followed the truck in his car as she cooed and coaxed him to persist with what small courage he could muster. Being a basic Walter Mitty type, oscillating between anguish and exhilaration, he'd known the time spent with her had been a lie, but would not let himself believe it. The credit goes to her stimuli, which could coerce most men beyond the conformity of their

being.

When this threesome came into view, I barely breathed, lest I break their fragile spell. I could see Ogilvie thinking, stumbling, trying to back up and stop himself, while Karena encouraged her brave lover on. Pratee had carried nine boxes in when Ogilvie flipped. Jesus, he was arguing with her now! He would do no more. Karena threw up her hands and walked into the post office with the muttering drip behind her. Pratee looked cautiously to me for directions, and I signaled him to drive out the main gate pronto with the last six still aboard.

I jumped in and we raced for the GAO. The hands of my watch crossed noon as my stomach churned. The big doors were closed, but my man stuck his head out a window shouting he'd be right down. I told him my director was here and lunch would have to take a raincheck. Promising him more than lunch next time, I made small talk while Pratee dumped the last six boxes on the pile. Then we raced for the bungalow as the C-130 roared over the Laotian jungle, most of my treasure aboard, and disappeared in the haze to the south.

We stopped at Mr. Lee's and asked him through the truck window if he'd seen Karena. He didn't seem to recognize me. Forgetting about my disguise I tore it off...to his astonishment! Knowing something was wrong, he gave me a stoic salute and stood in the intersection like a traffic cop to wave her on when she appeared. My heart was pounding and the truck still idling outside the bungalow as I watched through the louvres, all the while throwing our valuables into a dufflebag. A taxi stopped at the end of the lane and Karena got out and strutted towards me, shaking her head.

The dust hadn't settled when a USAID sedan blocked the lane and a hulking Japanese dressed like the spook leaned against its open door. Fuck me! Slithering out the other side was the bald head and silver glasses! Pratee looked at me from his truck, and then up the lane. I should have said goodbye...for I never saw him again.

With superhuman strength, I ran across our room, teak dresser in a bear hug, breaking through the bungalow's iron grating, and tumbled out with Karena on my back. We fled through the jungle, across plank bridges, which I knocked down, and along narrow dikes I knew so well. At the temple, I waved at my monkey friend, still sitting in his tree waiting for the old monk to reincarnate. He smiled the monk's smile, waved us on, and we were gone.

The old man at the sunken derelict couldn't read the flashcard, so I drew a boat on his sandy floor and pointed to Si Sing Mai on the opposite shore, at which he scurried off. Crossing the Mekong for what I swore would be the last time, I realized I hadn't said goodbye to Pratee. Lowering my head I wished his family well. There were several scary road blocks where Thai soldiers looked us over, but with Karena's

tits covering our exit we did pretty well. A Huey hovered over us for a while...its menacing shadow like Magoo's raincloud. I covered Karena with a scarf and sat close with a newspaper over my face.

I tried to explain we'd be splitting up before we got into Bangkok, and she began to cry. I told her how dangerous it was for us to be together, but could hear myself lying. It wasn't the free plane ride, or respect given a Chief Petty Officer, more the anonymity of a war-zone needed at this precarious moment. The truth was I just couldn't let anyone into my life...so kissed her goodbye quickly and got out at the junction to Utapao Air Base. She had a thousand bucks, her ticket, and a pouch of Mama-san's best. She didn't even ask for my address, and I wonder if I would've given it to her.

I disappeared into the military slipstream, choppered into Saigon by nightfall, and on the phone to Tiny. I told him how screwy things had become, that I hoped all my stuff was on its way to Hawaii, and that his coffins were still on hold at Udorn. I could hear the wheels turn in his mind, as he considered bringing them back full. I didn't care, I was definitely retired and needed an exit visa and a lift stateside pronto. I thanked him, and slept on a cot in a field tent at Ton Son Nhut until his people came and shuffled me into a Strategic Air Command freighter late that night.

Camped alone on some mail pouches in the cavernous cargo belly as the monster screamed through the stratosphere, I tooted a little smack and curled in my army jacket with a vague hope it was really over. In the dream that came over me, a little boy floated in a dirigible, infinitely orbiting life but never really touching it...or being touched either.