

## THE EDGE

They swirled from night mists in my mind and beckoned my name with taunting calls. It had always been just a matter of when they would issue their dare. Infinitely sinister excitement lured me. I have no words of explanation, and don't even remember goodbyes to Kela. Maybe being normal just didn't provide enough amps to keep me going...I don't know now, and didn't care then. All I felt was a craving to be in it again. Nothing less would do. My stab at being a real person had failed...I was crossing the Mekong, covered with a fishnet on the wet deck of a sampan.

What's there to say? Sure, the visions swept over me and nightmares too. I'd woken in sweats, glaring into the dark, but, on the whole, enjoyed them. They seduced me with an alternative, overpowering anything offered by a regular life. Isolated as I was in my visionary world, I had to explain some of it to Kela, especially after waking her one night in the dream whispering, "They're close!" I could still hear the clucking reeds bending slowly up ahead, as they did after a man had trampled them in passing. I held her mouth shut while smells of the jungle surged over me, and faint sounds in the night continued even as I looked at her. Her eyes, I recognized them, full of terror...the ones whose slit throats gurgled while silent tears mixed in the flow from a dark pumping gash.

After that, she knew I had to live it out somehow, or do something to either escape or confront it. She never even whimpered. One day I came home from work, packed my stuff quietly, and returned to it's elemental source. She was waving goodbye last I saw, like I was off to the jobsite with my packed lunch in hand...but surely it flipped her switch. When I was gone, she began to find her way slowly back to where she'd started.

I tried to blame it on Ralph. He's the one who wanted so badly to visit my clandestine netherworld and make a buncha money. Shit, a thousand bucks a pound for ganja! We envisioned million-dollar trips. His lieutenants could manage his cocaine network. This was sheer adventure.

He couldn't even see the bottom of the boat he was so delirious from an attack of some violent intestinal flu. He'd sold the ganja I'd mailed when here before, and spent all the money, getting the fever to make the big-time with this smuggling proposition...even urging me with altruistic motives, like this was "sacramental stuff" needed by our generation.

He'd instigated the night tripping blacked-out in camouflage with my machine guns, practicing our version of the creepy-crawlies in the hills of Kahuku where the military

held maneuvers in fabricated Vietnamese villages. We'd drop acid and sneak through the mock war-zone, setting off explosives behind their lines, and blowing their rigid minds. It was hysterical, and beat all to hell the old stunt of laying on the jet runway! We stole several cases of grenades right from under their noses, too! It was infectious, and Ralph was very good at this sort of thing.

Yeah, he'd encouraged and promoted the whole scheme...it was really his fault. I probably would've gone on to become normal if not for his prodding. I laughed to myself, and peered cautiously through the fishnet that covered us both, squinting over the gunnel into the midday reflection on the river. This was my call...

I was really in it now, an international outlaw halfway between Thailand and Laos, with the Thai Army looking one way and the Pathet Lao, Royal Laotian Army, and both local police forces looking the other. I felt a little uncomfortable for a moment, and shifted the ten-grand nervously like some sitting duck. Then the river's glare revealed the sunken steamer, looking like a crippled dinosaur stuck in the mud of time.

I'd played on the beach here once with Kela after school, and had made friends with the family living in this old derelict. The war had been more low-key when we'd explored the island and swam here, and back then I'd hired a small boat to take us across the river to the Thai side to see the beautiful Buddhist temple at Si Sing Mai. I was so in love with the country then I'd decided if I ever needed to escape, I'd come to the temple and cross to this island between the two countries, where I'd live in a little hut on poles, watch the river go by, and let the opium lady prepare my pipes.

Realizing Ralph was too sick to make it across the island and over the rickety bridge, I directed the sampan away from the steamer to a French ski-dock a half mile further south. It was risky and took all my cool, strength, and resources to get him safely to the family compound without being noticed. The official Laotian border crossing, some thirty miles south at Nong Khai, was a place to avoid in this line of work, as it was better on my passport to have never been in the country, should anything go wrong. So I wasn't there.

Neither was Ralph. He slept for five days, and I had to get Souvat to care for him in their bungalow, while the rest of his family ground gigantic bales into the powdered marijuana I called the "Golden Voice." Souvat's mother was the head lady in this trade, and chewing betel nut in her stall at the marketplace, she'd introduced me to every organic drug her country produced.

I'd decided long ago on ganja, and had avoided any karma attached to her other products: opium, raw morphine, and heroin. She was all smiles to see me, and I gave her wages

enough for several lifetimes in that first moment, so she would realize my worth from our beginning. I needed her family more with Ralph laid up. Actually, I was relieved, there being no telling what he would've chosen to ship on his own.

During the day, I reconnoitered the USAID Compound, the GAO shipping office, and APO, getting uneasy when I'd see familiar faces. What was I doing here, anyway? I should think out an answer. Crossing the rickety bridge, I walked though the ganja patch on the island, trying to relax and make up a story. Light filtered through the feathery stalks and star-shaped leaves, bathing me in a soporific aroma. It was my job to get this enlightening product to America where it would be properly appreciated. I sat on a little pier, brooding in some half-dream state, but aroused by the danger I'd put myself in.

I became absorbed in the river's passage. Brown eddies sucked and swirled like snakes flowing past my feet. Borne in Mongolian mountains, they'd slipped past millions of beings to reach me, and many more in three countries would see them pass before they turned red in that bloody war. I sat in deep meditation, like Siddartha at his river, as they flowed by on the flimsiest of films.

I saw Kela sitting by the ocean in front of our little house, waiting for her "Kerry Kat" to return. Was she the reason I was out here? Was fear of a family, an eight-to-five job, and the prospect of normalcy just too great? I shrugged it all off. I just liked the wild side of life...it was that simple. Like a snail crawling along a razor blade, I preferred balancing at its most critical edge.

I had to concentrate on logistics and my credibility around the spooks at USAID. There was no forcing my mind...it wandered where it wished, even back to pounding nails and polishing the car. I didn't mind the job, and was home in time to spear some fish around the little island in front of the house. I saw the shark again. Every afternoon he would dart around, pinning me to the reef, making my eyes bulge and heart pound in fear. He wasn't smart though, just very aggressive, and I'd found him in mid-channel hanging from a line that stretched from the island to my roof, very much the loser in our battle. His head was propped open on a pipe now, voracious jaws grinning at the sea breeze.

That was it! Mike and Susan's heads propped on those poles over their well! I could be sent by a relative to ship their belongings home. Shuffling possibilities, I ducked through the marijuana forest and made my way to Souvat's. With his decent command of English, we had a sawmill cut thin mahogany plywood into crate-liners that could hold exactly seventy pounds of powdery gold. They couldn't weigh more at the Army Post Office. Working backwards, cramming sample boxes with guesswork and a variety of scales, the women laughed at my antics as they sat in a semi-circle

grinding away. The project was gonna work, I knew it now, and my enthusiasm reached a tireless pitch.

Scurrying around Vientiane like a whirlwind, I quite forgot about Ralph lying in their bungalow. Souvat assured me with a smile that his sister had him covered, so we continued our espionage. I needed cardboard boxes, strapping tape, fiberglass and cloth, metal banding straps and a logo printer. Shit! In Laos that's like trying to buy a surfboard, a Harley, or some round-eye pussy. Stumped, I sat in Mr. Lee's coffee shop with my odd shopping list. Pratee, Souvat's brother, worked at the USAID motorpool and scrounged most of the materials. In the end, would you believe a USAID truck delivering fifteen seventy-pound crates to the APO on official business?

It was all going too well. Stepping into the Post Office, there was good 'ol Mrs. Spielman still licking stamps in her Civil Service mediocrity.

"My, oh my!" she began, "If it isn't, uh, Terry...oh yes, well, how is Kela? Is she back teaching again?"

I could feel the hangman's noose tightening. I had never planned on being identified. "She's in Bangkok shopping, Mrs. Spielman," I replied in cordial tones, "and asked me to say hello to you."

I let her banter on about this and that, and then in a pregnant moment I dropped it on her: "Do you remember Mike and Susan Adams?"

At this she bowed her head, "Have pity on their poor souls."

I reminded her how Kela and I had left during that unfortunate period, and asked her how things were now, as if we were considering returning. Then I broke the news to her in confidential tones, "I came up at their parents' request to ship their personal things home. It's a burden on you and has been difficult for me, but someone had to do it for them." Pointing out the window to the loaded truck, I appealed to her for help.

"Oh, that's so nice of you, Terry. Why don't you have your men drive around back and put them right into the airport van. We'll dispense with some of the drudgery." Mrs. Spielman wiped her brow daintily with her little hanky, while I throttled my enthusiasm. This was beyond my wildest dreams! I heard her muttering, "This place is so dull. It's just nice to see you again. Those were better times."

While Souvat and Pratee winked at me between grunts, I paid her eighty-eight dollars for a cool million-dollar load, and helped put the stamps on them as well. Making small talk to keep from hearing my pounding heart, I asked her, "How much longer will you stay in Laos?"

"Oh, I ship out in sixty-four days, Terry...at last!" She smiled, patting her forehead, another job well done.

"Well, maybe I'll see you by the pool for a soda, Mrs. Spielman. I've gotta run some more errands while I'm here."

Bowing gracefully, I said, "Goodbye," wondering if she could carry the story to the swimming pool before the mail plane left.

I guessed it didn't matter anymore. The die was cast, and the next danger would be in opening them. They were carefully coded with tiny dots on the inside of the steel bands so I'd know if they'd been tampered with. They even had cotton padded corners in case they were dropped. Outwardly they looked common enough...but they were veritable time bombs in my mind, and I was anxious to meet them at the University of Hawaii where Daniel, my buddy, waited nervously, checking the East West Center mail room on a regular basis.

Ralph was able to move at last. At noon, while the sun blazed off the mirrored Mekong, and the eyes of Asia napped, we said goodbye to my Laotian brothers, and vaporized into the mirage from whence we'd come. My monk friends at Si Sing Mai got us a taxi, and we were in Bangkok by daybreak, Hong Kong the next night, and Hawaii the same day the boxes arrived. I sighed in disbelief...I'd become an international smuggler!

I sat on the beach at sunset with Kela, wondering what her reactions would be. She knew both sides of me...the messed up retard who didn't know which way to go at a stoplight, and the madman who could pull off a covert op like this one.

"My dear, Gemini husband," she began. "Will you ever be whole? You love and hate me in the same breath, play with peace and danger like toys, and cultivate respect in one moment and disgrace the next. What is to become of us? Will the genius be mine or the lunatic? I wonder whether your goal is to create or destroy, and I'm sure you don't know."

"I don't, baby, I really don't! It's scary almost, but I'm drawn to fear. It's like a dare or some adrenalin rush I get being on the edge out there...like that nasty war, ya know?"

She bowed her head and replied softly, "What can I know? I'm just a girl and you say I'm too pushy at that."

"I dunno, I just dunno. We'll just have to wait and see, I guess," baiting her to see if she was going to stay with me or leave, but she just held me, rocking back and forth humming, "Baby, baby, baby."

I was back at work pounding nails in the hot sun, with only a nine-day absence to explain. It seemed like nine months to me. Ralph met me at lunch to explain how he'd arranged with the local Hawaiian syndicate for the first ten-grand drop that night. I argued for working with our friends and the hippie artist world, but he was a realist when it came to business.

"They just don't have the bread, man," he stated coldly, "and I'm not gonna wait on street corners, selling ten

one-pound hits for anyone! Fuck it, man. Let's do some quick volume and get our acts cleaned up. These guys'll go fifty-grand next week!"

"Well, my act's OK now, and I don't want these "blalabs" thinking big and stepping on us. I can sell some to the Stones, ya know," I bargained.

"Right," he said, "but let's run a few leads through my people. They control Honolulu and we'll be fine with them. They're like family with me, and handle a lotta my coke. There won't be any problems, I promise."

"OK, but not for long with these mental midgets! It'll go to their heads. I know 'em too! We went for the adventure, remember?"

"Yeah," he smirked with a withering vocal sneer. "Right, the adventure. I just don't remember that part, get it?"

He left me sitting there with my lunch can, hammer, and nail bag. Shit, there was more to being an international smuggler than met the eye.