

TO FEEL LIFE KEENLY

As we lifted off, I asked the pilot to take the little plane over the harbor. There, covered with waving kids was the most beautiful raft you'd ever want to see, complete with a diving board.

"How do ya like the raft?" I asked.

"Hey now, it's a real beauty! Look at that face on it!" he exclaimed, rolling us over for a better view.

"That's Ra, the sun god," I said, looking down with pride.

"Did you do that, son?" he asked.

I held up my splinted left hand. "It did it to me maybe," I laughed, thinking how much this seasoned pilot reminded me of the vets who'd flown Air America planes in Laos. I wanted to tell him that's where I was going, but no one needed to know.

I was wrapping up my day's work, admiring the raft, when I cut the end of my finger off. The giant sliding door on the old barn had no stop, and the steel handle slammed right into the concrete like a guillotine. What a godawful mess! I grabbed the mangled end of my finger and drove right up Doc Howell's steps with my horn blazing. He was working on his orchids, and seemed unconcerned about the damage. What I thought was terminal just challenged old Milton. He was a real country doctor and patched that finger up pretty good...although it's a little short.

I'd been stoned on pain killers in my easy chair with Kela's Siamese, Sheeba, purring on my lap and the finger throbbing in tune with my heartbeat when I heard the news blurb: "Brian Jones, brilliant guitarist and founding father of the Rolling Stones was found dead in his swimming pool today." Jesus, he'd finally done it, stepped out of his sorrow! I tried to remember his face and wondered where we go when we die. I cried for a while, knowing his confusion. He was a lost little boy, like me.

With Kela's help, I put on my blue English boots and got out the Stones' albums. I sat there in a trance for four days, rocking back and forth, listening to their music, and reliving the moments we'd spent together. The last time this feeling washed over me was when Kennedy died. I'd sat mesmerized by a gray TV screen...then abandoned school and skipped the country.

This time, whacked-out on Scotch and Percodan I lurched off once more, kissing Kela goodbye, and set out on another mission impossible. I may as well do something mental, I conspired with myself, as physical work was out...but any excuse would have sufficed. My obsession with danger outweighed all reason. I never gave life a chance to settle

down. If it did, I stirred it up right away.

On the long flight, my primal flirtation with violence crept into a particularly intense dream. Nicky, Brian, and I roamed the streets of London wrecking havoc like rogues from "Clockwork Orange." I sensed the loneliness that had driven Brian off the edge...the remote hurt that fed his scorn as we'd sat together in the Stones' private nightclub, surrounded by his envied contemporaries. I'd never wanted to know the secrets of their inner world, and as spaced-out as I'd been, what did I care if Mick was with Marianne or Anita? Brian was helpless between these threesomes, trusting like me in a world of vampires and ego-trippers.

As long as my ego left me alone, I'd carried the gun, sacraments, and money, and minded my own business. Even then I'd sensed his impotent state, as the women plied their sexual powers, and intrigue swirled between the mixed lovers. Maybe I should've said something or been more of a friend instead of remaining so aloof...but I'd played a game inside their game, insulated by my own necessities, at arm's length from an insanity that would've consumed me, had I let it.

"Sir, we're landing at Kai Tak International. Please fill out your customs forms and put your seat back to its original position."

I scribbled industrial samples and wandered into the throngs of rice eaters to change money so I could hire someone to carry my bags. The huge suitcases had almost no clothes but were full of fiberglass, catalyst, strapping tape, and roles of brown wrapping paper. The scene at immigration didn't phase me a bit, but the one at Ruby's Guest House that night sure did. I just kept mumbling, "3M rep" to the Customs Agent. But the State Department weirdos were far more difficult.

I still don't know who they were looking for, and Ruby hasn't got it straight to this day. I was so groggy when they shined their flashlights in my eyes, it was all I could do to point at my finger, wrapped in red, while they tore my room and bags apart. They looked at me like doctors, one at a time, and I crossed my eyes and made invisible signs of protection until they left.

In the morning, I cut down my intake of Percodan and shuffled to Ruby's kitchen for the latest in Hong Kong's gossip. Over bird's nest soup and tea, I gathered the Americans were looking for someone...such comprehension being a big start for me. I took the ferry from Kowloon to the island to find Tommy Wong, my all-knowing contact. I gave him three grand with instructions to put together a security unit for my Hana base, including an alarm and light system for an acre perimeter. Then we went shopping for wigs, and to a friend of his who worked in cosmetics, for the rest of two complete disguises.

That much effort almost did me in, and we went out to Sheko for a few cold ones on the veranda of his friend's

mansion. I would've liked to prowl the night with him as we usually did, but the finger throbbed and my drug-saturated system balked. After an early dinner at a floating restaurant in Aberdeen, he escorted me to Ruby's, where I gave him a hundred-dollar bill. I told him to have some fun and expect me in a week or so. Tommy was a fine friend in that anthill.

My sources in Bangkok were not that good, and it took me a whole day to find a decent weapon. I settled for a Lambretta, and altered the holster at a shoe shop to fit under my arm. A pharmacy sold me a quart jar of codeine tablets. Would you believe over-the-counter narcotics? I poured them into the vitamin jug Kela'd given me, chuckling at this clever forethought. What a joke! My work was six-hundred miles north in a war-torn world of life and death, and I shopped for the best limo I could find. Soon I'd be in no man's land, where switching labels on bottles would seem absurd.

I had to tell the dwarf driving the car that the location was Nong Khai, figuring when we got nearer I would detail a map for him, taking us along the river, through the tobacco lands, and north thirty miles to Si Sing Mai. I should've been either clearer with him, or awake, as it was with severe consternation that I woke up directly outside the Thai-Lao customs office at the Nong Khai bridge!

I quickly told him to "leo sai" or "leo quah," urgently indicating we should get the fuck out of there! Then he and I had a long talk at a roadside stand, while I tried to deduce if it was safe to continue with him. He seemed to understand my desire to visit a monk up the river, and with a healthy tip thrown in, we motored on.

I noticed the tobacco fields were unplanted, but didn't think much of it, as the panorama of village life streamed by, marred only by an occasional military patrol marching around in the red dirt looking for someone just like me. When I tried to get down to the river, I knew things were really outta whack. The steps carved in the mud bank had disappeared, and we used a rope to get my suitcases to the water's edge.

The shallow sampan gained on the current, the sun painted us into a mirage, and my island loomed in heatwaves on the surface of a dream ahead. Jeez, I gasped, the French dock was gone! As my eyes focused, I saw the island was swept clean...huts, gardens, ganja patch, and all! What the fuck, over? Where to land became my next priority, and I chose the old freighter stuck in the mud, its grisly propeller groping like a hand from a grave.

There was some laundry hanging on the struts, and the family was still living in her dark innards. The old man remembered me, bowing with "Jai di," good soul, and helped get the suitcases into the sandy floors of his adopted home. The ancient derelict lay angled in the mud about thirty

degrees to starboard, with the bow under about forty-feet of mud. He and his family had leveled the various compartments with sand and straw so every room was a trapezoidal, optical illusion. I hid my bags in his metal dungeon and tromped forward with him, half on a bulkhead and half an old deck, to his shaky wooden bridge to the mainland.

It didn't take me long to find Souvat. Puttering along in a motorized rickshaw in my first disguise, I encountered his motorcycle gang near the central market, dressed in T-shirts with Hawaiian scenes emblazoned all over them! I laughed almost out of the bouncing seat, waving and expecting to be recognized. When I pulled off the wig and glasses, he nearly fell off his bike. Then his little biker band formed a motorcade and escorted us on our way.

At his house a great reunion ensued. They worshipped me. By such wealth, I'd elevated their lifestyle, and stockade-like walls now gave considerable security. This time mama-san shook her head dismally while Souvat translated that monsoon floods disgorged in the north had swept down river, taking all the ganja to the sea. He carefully pointed to high-water marks on their walls. There was no product to move.

The younger brothers retrieved my bags from the freighter, while he and I reviewed the island and their new fields to the south, where a large crop was growing nicely. We contracted for plywood liners, stocked in the American supplies, and laid plans for an encore. I advanced their family five-grand for the growing ganja, leaving harvest and refinement to his judgment.

Souvat was proud to oversee his family's fortune, and eagerly accepted the job to store the huge pile and turn it twice daily so it wouldn't ferment. I tried my disguises and snooped around the village and Dong Palane's bars, bungalows, and bordellos. The stage was set, but its drama would have to wait. I headed home like an unsuspecting tourist.

There was a layover in Hong Kong, a city where the night life has always held a special allure for me. Its combination of exotic smells, slit dresses, pressed ducks, and teeming populace, awash in a sea of sound and color blur common dimension. Tommy and I sat in the luxury of a fancy whorehouse, stoned on codeine and Scotch, watching flawless Eurasian women slither by in enticing silk and see-through lace. This odd sensation came over me of the ageless traveller, a cartoon vision of Popeye, the sailor man, and Marco Polo wrapped up in one maverick incarnate.

Choosing a young girl, I beckoned her to sit with me. The material molded the creased mound between her legs, showing the peach-shaped slice of her organ, and almond eyes stared at me without blinking, as if she'd been mine forever. I touched her, and an exciting current surged between us. That night, in a faraway land, I discovered that drugs and alcohol could prolong and enhance sexual pleasure. Never

before intrigued with oral sex, her vagina was so perfect, and my urge so strong, that I kissed it for hours. My tongue become an erect, penile snake, while she moaned, and her eyes shone the infinite woman in ecstasy...a lust she'd not let loose before.

It was truly awesome, and I wondered what was coming over me. I knew I was using a lot of codeine, but in the morning ate another handful and got on the plane. The dream was becoming reality...and I noticed I was making it up as I went along.