

A nighttime photograph of a crowded outdoor event, likely the Olympia fitness show. The scene is dimly lit, with warm yellow lights from street lamps and buildings in the background. Palm trees are visible against the dark sky. In the foreground, the silhouettes of people are visible, some sitting on the ground. The overall atmosphere is that of a busy, festive night event.

Traveller's tales
Volume 2

O L Y M P I A

Traveller's Tales

: volume 2

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This book is dedicated to
Christine Fisher

Traveller's Tales

An Olympia Press Book

*"When you wake on a
Mars, then at least you'll know
you've come home, Germaine"*
Billie Strange

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SuperStars

By
Andrea Mars

SUPER STARS

The God Shiva was

sent to the top of mount Kailash to brood; and he spent his days of solitude in contemplation and in the arms of hallucination. Thus, his followers still journey in the land that today is called Himachal Pradesh. To find that sustenance - which grows, cultivated or not, - in the far, free valleys.

There is a wonderful light which settles around the mountains of the Himalaya at sunset.

She was lost for a moment, completely forgetting to even try and photograph the beauty of the scene as the light sank progressively behind the immense rock faces, finally leaving merely the smallest imprint on the high snowline, still above her. Flooding the Kulu Valley with deep thickets of darkness.

Too late she remembered and then looked for the now useless camera. They were calling her:

"The light will be gone very soon"

"It's dangerous!"

She struggled to the edge of the path, and bade swift farewell to the mountains for a small rare shared instant.

The four of them bustled along the path, and after a couple of kilometers it began to change bit-by-bit from fine slippery shale to coarse chips

of granite.

As the heat faded from the sky it moved from gentle cerulean to deep powder blue, to darkest ivory black: simultaneously the temperature changed from shaded deep warmth to a freezing knife, edged by rising wind. Unprompted, her teeth chattered. Down at the level of the treeshadows they became cocooned in dark, thus they slid and clutched at one another for support.

By now the light had faded almost to nothing, and Jonathan made to find the torch in his pack. Then, in the rich ultraviolet of absolute darkness she saw the colour of a bright turban and the fast grimace of teeth against sable; a stranger walked with and by them for a moment, hefting the slicked curve of a cutlass.

"No lights here, Baba!"

The whiff of a forgotten perfume, the light swirl of

breath or charris smoke.

Roses. Then he was gone.

"Phew!" said Erica, in the darkness, "Jon, didn't you know that a light around here gives some crazy Bandicoot a target!"

They walked in now sweating silence for some apparently considerable time.

"Where the hell is the town?"

"Look at the map!"

"Don't be stupid!"

"Oh, for Chrissake!"

"Let's just stay on the path"

More silence.

"Chrissake!"

She could see the glittering umbras of lights reflected against foliage somewhere in the pathway ahead. It must have been the heightened sensitivity of her eyes, finally accustomed to the

utter shade, for none of the others saw a thing for quite a time.

Much crunching and cussing amongst the sharp shards of rock upon the now softening surface.

Moments later.

"Lights!", said Jonathan.

Unexpectedly, the subtle curves of the pathway opened out within a few hundred metres and then they passed the low outlines of the usual wattle and stone dwellings.

It may have been her imagination, she thought, but she could swear that she could clearly but indistinctly hear the sounds of music: the zip of the strings, the pad of the Tabla. Sounds of merriment and movement in accents strange for this north-west facing place so bedecked by mountains.

"Nothing will surprise me!" said Jonathan, adjusting

his short-sighted glasses and stopping to examine the map with minute, fingertip accuracy, digit pointing at lost details.

"It's not there", said Erica, "I looked".

Indeed the town, or whatever it was, was indeed not on their map.

"Well!" said Jonathan, "And the bloody thing cost me 10 Rupees in Delhi!"

"What'll we do now?" said Felix.

"Go towards the music!" said she, logically.

As is normal amongst truly high mountains, the large building they thus found had the shape of a squared circle, the broken entrance end rather in the manner of a fortifiable gateway, though presently now ajar, or even open. Through the

trellis so created she could see the outline of at least one battered motor vehicle of unknown provenance.

The sounds deepened and became richer as they walked through the gate and entered the courtyard proper.

"Bon-jewer!" said a small voice at her knee. She jumped.

When she looked down she found a brown, small face regarding her with earnestness.

"Can you speak English?" she said.

"I speak English good!" said the child - "*Je ve retour a' ma maman*".

And then disappeared into the shadows.

The music and a certain scattered melee of voices issued from the central part of the structure before them.

They had a brief parley

before entering.

"Can't find it on the map at all!"

"We'll ask 'em"

"Must be some bloody old Hill Station"

"We'd better ask to stay the night or something"

"Looks enormous"

"I'll ask", she said.

"Okay"

They mounted the steps and she pushed the door.

After many days walking in the mountains, none of them could have foreseen the scene which greeted them.

The series of rooms which now presented themselves had the same character that one might expect were one to use the exteriors of the houses in this place as

a reference point: but despite the antiquity and obsolescence of the basic fittings, the tables which kitted-out two of the rooms, and the elemental counter in the other main one seemed to be modern in concept if not in execution.

Kitchen noises issued from an invisible end, possibly a one time stable, while the resultant wisps of charcoal smoke filtered in and gave the interior an indescribably comfortable aroma.

At the centre of another smaller room sat a small band, Sitar, Tabla and a sort of fiddle. A group of people watched a dancer in rapt attention, and the sounds of the instruments penetrated the ramshackle walls of that small room and created a sort of stereo in the others so that the singer and the dancer had a perfect audio stage upon which to perform.

The audience of ten or a dozen sat in rapt concentration, and a small man with a wizened, stressed face came forward to greet the new arrivals, with no sign of surprise.

"Have a seat ...Have a seat!"

The little brown man's wizened face had a moment of tension in the eyes.

They sat down and took a long time to completely believe that a place like this could really exist in such an out of the way spot.

Among the clientele was a smattering of English, German and French speakers: and the hive of children served, harangued, flirted with the clients and made them laugh.

"Have a seat ...Have a seat! ...there".

The little brown man's wizened face welcomed another stranger, in from the dark. They stayed that night and several more. Nights with freezing clear black skies: often star shine reflected bright enough to cast sharp shadows.

Next night; black as pitch save for that intense starshine: then an enormous comet or shooting star carving it's way in a vast curve across the dome over her head, leaving, stopping (or dying) as it approached the snow peaks to her left. She privately now called the place *Super Stars*; set, as it was there high among many stars, never mentioning that fact to a soul. Privately; told absolutely no-one, it was her own, secret affair. Anyway, she was surprised at her own gaucheness. And as she began to

get to know the man, Tashi, and his many children, she in her turn felt curiously comfortable with his presence, for no good reason. Lost days in those Himalayas. There was a sense of loss in it for some unknown reason. By day the sun was extraordinarily hot, and one's skin seemed to dry in the extreme surface heat, broken only by fluttering scurries of wind.

The wind, which by day came mostly in gusts, complimented as it were, by the prayer flags long ago torn to the shreds by the weight of the prayers they carried to it, and which lined the edges of the compound thus signalling to anyone who cared to think, that this was a place of refuge for those lost men from the north.

That next night the place filled with strange strong-smelling people with slit eyes and greased or buttered hair and deeply lined, tanned skins, some of them women; Tashi said:

"They are friends of mine, on the run from the Chinese in our home." In a matter-of-fact way.

She took this to be Tibet. He fingered his wrist and gave her a thin skein of colours to bind around hers:

"This is my blessing-I got it from a Holy Man on the Yak route when I came here. The way to the Stars".

She knew enough to know that that was in itself a great favour from a devout follower of The Holy One, The Lord, and was touched by his gentleness...

The crowd that night then were countrymen from this area

of the mountains: mountain men, who ordered tea with butter, eschewed any Spirit or alcohol; who paid merely *Paice* for their pleasures; who smoked *Charris* after their choice was finished, to dispel the days fatigues.

These people smiled at you with gap-toothed mouths; their hair was black and lank, their clothing voluminous, and though tattered and worn it was yet rich and sumptuous; a species of rich wool brocade.

By day such people would spent hours chanting gentle deep rhythms to themselves, whirling their prayer wheels absentmindedly while smoking twisted bitter black cheroots or reading a holy script... and sometimes Tashi, too would change his busy personality and become one of them.

Strangers of this nature maintained within themselves a sense of silence, of deep

psychic repose, which she envied and which she had always sought.

But then, by night, Tashi's residence, or Hill Station, call it what you will, was a hive of industry. Every evening the non-native 'locals' would seek out amusement for themselves.

Also a circumstantial number of travellers, who treated it much as it must originally, been intended to be used - as an inn along their way.

It also seemed that pleasure seekers came great distances, attracted perhaps by word of mouth to such a rare place, forgotten by the map makers for long enough to develop a certain cult attraction.

Often in the afternoons, Europeans and other strangers, unlikely and sometimes illegal residents, some gaunt followers

of Shiva, some junkies who had journeyed north to refurbish their supplies: people with nothing better to do, would arrive in the courtyard and make a day of it.

To amuse themselves these visitors would teach the children their languages or sometimes play one of the incomprehensible blocking-games so common in those mountains: (and brought there, she had heard said, by stragglers from Alexander's army, two millennia past.) Or they would revert to the bad manners of smoking some Hash, or having gone native, chewing a little Bhang to jolly the day along, or perhaps scorching a pellet of Opium to forget the day entirely. Time moves slowly if at all, in the Himalaya; and Bhang and Opium, after all, are cheap, if you don't need them.

This behaviour, however, was much frowned-upon by the locals, who sat drinking tea in the shade of the ramshackle verandah and discussing such ill behaviour in their inscrutably unmoving way.

Aah, but by night the place was always full to its capacity. Money remained yet to be made. Lots of it, even if only in small *Peice's*.

Then, unexpectedly; the unlikely, unprompted. Answering a vagrant *thought* of hers.

"One day," said Tashi, "I shall retire!"

"Why?" she said

"Because I've been doing this for several years and I hate all the busy-ness every night", he said, in his sing-song way shaking his head from left to right as if to

reinforce his words.

"So you must be a rich man now ..I mean, you must be making lots of money".

A smile.

"Oh yes, but richness is relative to the mind", he said, flashing uneven teeth pitted by sugar, and being a Bhuddist, and true.

On her last night there in the mountains she saw, as if in confirmation of her thoughts, Tashi empty the evening's takings of Rupees and Peice' into a large earthenware pot, and take it with him up the stairs to the room where he slept amongst his family.

"Where does he put it all?" she thought, knowing him to be an astute businessman.

But Tashi was above all, a native of that huge land to the north, Tibet, and she must remember that.

It was a long

time before she visited those Himalayas again: perhaps as long as five or six years. And she found the place sadly changed, the Inn now turned to a house used only by travellers from the local highlands, and her friend Tashi and his family gone. No one seemed to know how or where. Bhang and Opium leave nothing behind them, not even memories.

And so it was that one later day she found herself (as a result of the breakdown of the TATA bus for the umpteenth time) abandoning the transport in irritation and choosing to reach the end of the line - a town called Mussouri many miles from the great Himalaya, lacking its wonder and majesty, by other means (in this case one of those ox-carts with

ancient motor wheels).

Tired. Aimless. A little sad, she knew not for what, exactly.

But, she must first survive, that message would run through her mind constantly from now on and forever.

So first she found a place to stay: a pretty little room on a roof, precarious, but cool by night. Cheap, too. Showered, using the normal arrangement of a bucket and tepid water.

Now she wandered through the seraglio of the bazaar, packed with tourists from the Diasporas, and plains of central India; well-off people, matching the fact that she herself felt much better off in her mind, and much more secure in herself. Relaxed.

Suddenly she saw something in the corner of her eye. Someone she recognized.

For some reason.

And yet now, she walked across the bazaar slowing her pace through arguing crowds, past bartering faces, cheap tourist items much as you would find in any market, anywhere.

And, inescapably, there he sat...

A wizened, brown face with a slight smile, gazing at her with only the smallest sign of recognition.

The seller of cheap garish knitted garments lay against the wall and enjoyed the sun.

"Hello", he said. "Hullo ...I was expecting you!"

"Were you, really?"

"Of course"

"I'm surprised to see you"

"It's a long way from the
Kulu Valley"

"Then you really are
Tashi?"

"Yes, Missy"

She was amazed at the
change in his life. For now he
sold worthless garments and
took a pittance home each night
- yet if he had stayed at the
Hill Station he would have
remained a rich man.

Curiosity killed the
cat.

She rationalized;

*'He is simply returning to
what all his fellows would do:
perhaps it's group pressure?'* -
she could not know, never
would; but:

"May I ask why you stopped
running your lovely
restaurant?"

"The *rastaurant, yaas..*"
Tashi thought for a moment then gave a gesture of abandon. Thought again then smiled... "Ah! *That!*" As if it were a truly distant though bright star, not yet quite faded in his mind.

"Did it all fall through, burn down - *what?*"

"Oh no", he said, patting the ground about him as if he were preparing to balance a particularly tricky piece of hi-tech furniture there-"...Oh no! You see missy, it was that I couldn't bear the work, the worry, the stress, he searched for the words for a moment and then his eyes lit up-"*The Fame...!*"

He looked all at once enormously happy as if he had found the right place after a long search;

"I couldn't stand the bloody fame!"

And then an almost secret, yet exposed moment of smiling laughter.

She must have looked astonished then.

And then he elaborated:

"And you called my place *Super Stars!*"

Now they both laughed.

Obsession

by
Frank Réage

OBSESSION



used always to get the

same train every morning. That's the train that's Blue and Cream liveried, short, usually two or three cars.

As you know, it stops at Nice, which is where at that time I had a respectable Job, which was, as you can imagine in the days when I was expected by my relatives and family to make a start on a new, steady life, in

contrast to that which I'd lived in Paris.

I was an immigrant of sorts you see, so it must have seemed logical to my family, that was all, besides which it brought in a certain measure of money which they wouldn't need to contribute in order to maintain their errant son.

They always told me:

'Get yourself a job...

everything will begin to sort itself out then, and you can get yourself 'settled'. . .even find yourself a nice girl....'

So, as you can imagine, I'd been plodding away at this for

what seemed an eternity: at this dreadful, boring job; starting early, taking a pleasant break from it all most days by strolling along the 'Promenade des Anglais' before catching the train back to my pokey 'studio' a one room flat really, in the evening.

Yet, in some ways they were balmy days, no real responsibilities, and that customary pleasant, early afternoon end to the day. Oddly pregnant, a perpetual spring. This went on for some time, the pleasant round, as you can imagine.

And then one day, in fact as I strolled back up the Avenue

Medicin towards the station, past the sprawling cafes, I noticed a pair of eyes, seeking mine.

I turned, but they were gone in a flash.

I was left with the lingering sensation of an unscratchable itch between my shoulder-blades. Why, I had absolutely no idea.

Then, a few days later, I was strolling along the street which leads up onto the new spur of the 'Autoroute De Sud' at the rear of the town, you know it, don't you - when again I had that peculiar prickling sensation, now at the back of my neck, but nevertheless a queer prickling.

As I shifted my glance, I felt
rather than saw
a pair of eyes touch mine, with a
glance.

Now I saw her. Now I knew.

She was not a particularly
good looking woman, but
she had something about
her, so I smiled, and she
returned my glance with an
urgent, furtive look. Strange.
Straight faced. Almost glazed.

Afterwards I convinced
myself that this must have been
my imagination, that I'd invented
it all, so I ignored my intuition
and forgot it; one does, doesn't
one!

It was after all just the thought of a moment, and that was the size of it.

Oh, and my life in the bank slowly driving my intellect into the ground.

You know. Naturally, I found myself with some inner conflict, kept saying to myself: "But they tell you it's good for you, and they have only your best interests at heart!" To this day I wonder if 'They' would ever undertake to pay the bills for you in your life, the ones you ran up taking their advice, that is. Would they, do you think?

Then, almost consciously I

began to notice changes in myself, I would buy fussy things to delight myself after the boredom of the cheque-counting, or some such other mechanical task; spend my money on tomfooleries to surprise my friends, make love with my girlfriend . . . but spoil the moment by thinking about the next Monday...

What a waste..!

Subjected to such unconscious pressures, I had begun to dry up. Millions of people rationalize it all away. They say:

"But its all for the best!" or:

"It will soon pass, you will

see!" But it never will, you know.

So naturally, as you can imagine, I began to speculate within my life; after all I had the leisure for it in my mind; at the very least I had the spare capacity.

Just what was the next step? What would I be like in five, ten - years time?

The answer to such a nightmare was always in front of me when I looked at the other employees and saw how wasted they became over time. Young girls in the flower of their youth had been stunted, young men had had their

masculinity taken away from them, and become, well, like the draught animals I had seen on Provençal smallholdings.

Weeks had gone bye, and the summer had passed it's best.

Then one Wednesday I got on the train as usual at 7.10, and couldn't find a seat, which was actually quite a normal situation, unremarkable, so perforce I stood in the corridor.

As we got into the station at Nice I began to disengage myself as you do, in order to leave quickly, and then I happened to glance

at the big clock over the entry and the *Papeterie*, thinking to have a coffee; and there she was, that woman who'd I'd only had such brief inklings of previously.

She wasn't looking in my direction, standing by the Tabac, opening something or other.

I didn't stop to ask myself my motive, or stop to imagine or recall just how I had remembered her from among so many impressions in the intervening time; all that I felt was an overwhelming need which I could not fathom.

I was torn between my

curiosity, for some reason or other, and my hunger for a Croissant and a Cafe Creme.

The urgent needs of the organism intervened.

But anyway, by the time I traversed the tracks and gained the entrance she was gone.

Well, that was all I saw of her for quite a long time.

Summer days.

For then it was summer, and after work I would often go down to the beach and spend a pleasant evening, before the sun went down, hob-nobbing with other people, flirting with

the girls and watching their
bodies out of the corner of my
eye.

But then in the morning,
it was back to the desk,
watching the sun through the
window and cursing that I could
not do something less dreary.
You see, one needs the work,
does
one not!

And what, you may ask,
is to happen when one spends
all of one's life working in order
to be worthy, and then finds that
one is too old now to enjoy the
pleasures that the toil on behalf
of other people has brought

you?

Ah! Think about it.

Frankly though, it was not this that brought me to such a moment of truth, though moments of truth like that are wanted and important, no it was rather that something happened that could not be competed with by the pleasant evenings on the beach, or in the beach cafes where I drank my favourite beer, Porter 39; something strange enough to be exciting.

I was again catching a train,
but actually a train from

Ventimiglia to San Raphael on business, where I had to pick up some documents for the Sub-Manager, who had sensed some aggravation in my manner and I suspect, wanted to assuage one of his 'puppies' (as I heard him call us one day on the phone when the door to his office was ajar).

So I was standing in the corridor of the train, reading yesterdays *Nice-Matin* and swaying with the motion, tock, tock-tock.

It was an unusual year, when the weather was uneven; and the rain was contemptuous of our reputation for reliability on

it's behalf.

Suddenly the clouds, which had made it generally cool and gray, ruptured, and a whole ocean of water was catapulted at our train.

So dense was the downpour, that it actually came to a stuttering halt after Nice, where most of the passengers were glad, so it seemed to me, to abandon it. Then we pulled very slowly along the coast and CLACK the train stopped.

Being habituated to standing I had forgotten to take a seat, and now I found an empty compartment and sat down to continue.

The conductor passed along
the carriage corridor;

"This train will be delayed
for an hour!"

‘Good!’, I thought.

Many people left, jumping
down to the tracks and walking
along the line.

And then I turned over the
page edge of the sports report:
and saw Her. Hardly
a shock, though.

She smiled at me, with
a tight little mouth.

"I've often noticed you
in the corridor"

"Yes"

We made stilted
conversation.

Suddenly she seemed to become impatient. She stood up, and looked at me. I rose to my feet and followed her for some reason. She lit a Gitanes and stood by the window.

I was as if hypnotized.

Now she was very close, looking into my eyes. There was a Couchette compartment to one side (the train had started at Rome, I think, and the passengers had left).

Following her eyes, like a puppy-dog I stepped sideways and then for absolutely no reason I can think of except a sudden overwhelming intuition, I slipped my hand between her

legs.

You cannot imagine how she looked at me, how submissive, at the same moment wanting me. She eased the skirt of her dress up, and seemed to skip out of her slip; and there we were, making wild love - half sitting on the open *'lit'*.

There was barely enough time to snib the catch on the couchette door before her mouth was open like that of a starving creature; and for my part, I was suddenly free and magically gentle; an animal too.

How perfect and strange that was. What a day!

We had been making love

half-sitting, as I said. And after that wonderful endless small death had passed, we simply looked into one another's eyes, not smiling or even mentioning the smallest thing; simply experiencing that moment.

What can I say?

Such moments are very rare,
very precious.

Then she suddenly rose and took my hand and held it between her legs for a moment.

She smiled at me.

At the next stop she alighted from the train; for me San Raphael was an age along the coast.

Then the sun came out, and I walked up to the Crédit Agricole with feet as light as a lamb's, so happy I could not communicate it. Despite the clouds and the rain everything seemed to me to be happy.

You know, I had not thought it, but she was still a complete stranger to me. I had not thought to find out anything about her, and I knew less.

After a few hours I began to put that experience into some kind of category: I reasoned to myself that though this was a taste of something special, it should not be allowed to intrude into my

life.

But there had been a change in my life, unseen by my colleagues and friends. Only I knew that I had changed.

Now she haunted me. I could smell her scent. I began to look for her on the train each morning; search for that slightly haunted face. But nothing. Nothing.

And it was autumn, the light began to fail slightly, the beach was no longer crowded, the tourists had left, and the residents returned to their quiet lives.

I had been promoted to Chief Clerk (whatever that meant), and my work was now more complex and took much too much of my time

Then one day I tired of my office, took the afternoon off and went to walk in the Hills, near Mougins. I had the authority to do so. Anyway, I needed the break.

In those hills there lies a forgotten narrow track railway line, and since my boyhood it's been a place where I could find some sort of relief.

I always enjoy exploring

that forgotten railway system,
there behind the mountains.
Ancient constructions already,
almost in my time; tantalizingly
close to my idea of history.

So, exploratorily I began
to walk along the rail roadstead
fringed by tall walls
of rock, the old road blown
through massive gorges of
ancient granite, decorated by
shot holes and millions of giant
trilobites, an ancient dried sea
raised several thousand metres.
That was the attraction of this
experience to me; I could put all
the pointless activity in my life
into proper perspective and

laugh at it out loud.

Then I reached the end of the cut, and to my surprise found that the ground fell away for hundreds of metres; there, I was standing facing eternity; and if I were foolhardy enough to continue and proceed along the viaduct that began to span the distance between the two hills, only to be forced to halt where the gap was blown in its centre, then I would surely be able to look straight down and regard the face of fate itself.

Having thus lost myself in reflection I turned into a small

track that presented itself to the right, walked up the slope of the hill for a way, and took a rest.

From where I was sitting, over the crest of the broken rock I saw the red of a house roof, and I thought that there must be a roadway running there that I did not know, so I walked towards it.

The pathway ran past the house, winding through a little old olive grove; and finally exiting onto a slightly larger unmade road, which similarly wound away between stunted trees: the summers here inland often

being stifling and desert-dry.

But as I passed the front of the house I saw a pair of old clogs set down there, by the front entry door, and a scarf, one of those silken squares with some fanciful design upon it tied around an old, gnarled walking stick which lay against the wall.

Being curious, I looked more closely at these relics of a world that was gone by, imagining their owner, whom I was soon to meet.

For as I swung down the slope of the path towards the little road, an arm was thrust out of one of those

bushes by the grove, followed by a back, as the owner stepped backward into the path looking for something, half crouching and peering, and I almost collided with her.

Then she, the owner, straightened and turned; and suddenly my mind was blank, for there was my mysterious stranger, whirled at me from out of the forgotten dark of time.

I looked at her in immense surprise, and she for her part smiled distantly, as if, and perhaps not, remembering me.

“I... I' m amazed to see

you!”

She looked at me more deeply, a certain distress in her eyes.

It was extraordinary, beautiful, in a storybook sort of way. Or perhaps a it was a nightmare.

Then I was seized with the need to run like a maniac away from there.

And that changed me too. You see, my story was being spoiled, all my stories would be spoiled; the ripple would spread and break and everything would begin to peel apart, like damp papers from a

flooded wall.

At that moment she smiled, really smiled, and all my memories flooded back fresh like a sudden cyclone, almost frozen and cold but yet perfect. Each moment clear like crystal, like sight through bevelled glass, ground by my mind to be perfect and honed.

I stayed with her of course.

Of course I stayed with her; do you think that I am mad? I stayed with her for days; the end dropped out of perspective, the bottom failed in reality, the finest understanding of infinity became pure shit.

How trite people can be.

They seek to bind you in your own damn chains.

The 'Bottom Line' became how we smelt to each other. Perfect. Is there another, better way of feeling, that is worth a Sou? Well then smart boy, tell me, tell me!

I left my job, I left the world. People looked for me and found no trace. I never returned to my flat, I left it. I changed my hair, I wore different clothes, I got drunk and became a gardener in the mountains.

And it was because once, just once, I had seen what I had

seen, smelled what existence really consisted of.

And that is my story.

Actually, that is why I hate you for your 'con' question.

For me it's disgusting to live like a turd, live a life prescribed by some self important little Pasha, somewhere remote and self seeking, jump through some distant perverts' hoop each day. Playing the game they, the politicians, themselves representatives of mediocrity Manqué, have designed to tie you further in their confounded knots; their mortgages, their

home loans, their relief's
intended so that you should
produce mindless children for
them to use whichever way they
want; or to disagree with and
destroy.

Oh yes, that is sadness,
sickness, madness, and finally
the way to your own destruction.

And most of you spineless
gelded bastards live that way.

Now leave me alone.

I have my life to live away,
my way.

Leave me alone.

RAIN

by
Henry Maugham

RAIN

At that time Saigon was a bustling, decrepit, evil, smart, wicked unwholesome and perverse city.

That was in the last few months of the war. And believe me that that was truly the only war I'll ever see, that contrasted elegance and plenty with decrepitude and poverty, as well as violence and cruelty. Thus there was no time for gentleness or understanding; things moved much too swiftly and violently to allow passion or beauty.

Or is there nothing more beautiful than a Coke bottle? Especially in the places where you find them in South East Asian girlie shows.

And creativity? Creativity was being done in the most final of ways all around you, on TV, and in savage movement and thought; action art and true romance turned tragedy: the world in a moment. It had to be

that.

I think Coke summed up that war, both the drinking kind, and the sniffing kind (which was for WASP officers only, clean, you know... We didn't get to use it then... Only base opium or heroin.) In fact it was either pretty, pointless and poisonous, as well as tasteless - or it was wasted, expensive and deadly.... Diseased and torpid.

You could walk around the streets of the city and still find areas that had all the flavor of a French provincial city: or: the ghastliness of a slum described by Emile Zola, or those which you can find now in New York or Glasgow.

I spent lots of army time sitting in pavement cafes and listening to the Rolling Stones, drinking delicious cappuccinos and watching the swaying bodies pass me by in the oppressive heat of the sun. ...When suddenly there would be a flat, almost soft BANG!...and we would be cowering for our very lives as a window across the way disintegrated, the limbless torso of some poor bastard landed by the table splattering us with blood, and the traffic stopped... But

only for a brief time.

Yes, everything in Vietnam was quickly experienced and forgotten, as if it were too sweet to be lost, and yet too good to remain merely mortal....

So it was at the end of that summer, or the dry season, whatever they call it, and I had been dragged away from my Security duties as a pavement walker in the city, 'Protecting The Goons from Themselves', I called it; and told to do some real work i.e. risk my arse in some bug-infested swamp, up-country.

Well, that was the end of my time of stolen reverie. Now, there was a colonel there who didn't like Spick lieutenants, obviously an anal retentive I thought, who had the idea of blowing my arse straight through to nirvana, or anyway the next subway stop. He had the bright (for him) Idea of detailing me with some half-arsed Southern Vietnamese Fed driver, to drop munitions and supplies with an Artic (trailer) in a supply dump close to the 'border' with the north, where it could be accessed by

other Green Berets, people like us.

Well fine, but how do you do that, for Chrissake. It was Andrews (we called him Andrex) in my section who had the bright idea, and who was I to argue with him then!

Little did I know however, the following Tuesday, that when I looked at the new duty listings I would get a bad case of the mid-summer shivers.

Our transport was a forty ton White Articulated, a beautiful monster, high off the ground, with military spec's which lowered the smokestack from the roof to a by-pass with a huge condenser-like silencer that could be switched over real quick to isolate the engine if we forded a deep water area.

There was so much vehicle movement that no-one noticed the big Artic pull out before dawn. Despite the fact that you're in the tropics, it's surprisingly cool before the day comes up, and the little Fed

shivered so, that I gave him the wheel over the first couple of hundred miles. It was a beautiful clear day, and the roads were unusually clear, though sometimes far away over a hill you'd hear the crump and see the white smoke of a rocket going in. They make a sharp sound, really short, like TAP TAP, and this has actually lulled me into dreaming while I've been waiting in a dugout for something to happen.

Even when they're very close they sound quite harmless. So we passed a couple of road blocks, and the air was warm and the sun was terrific on the back of my neck, I began to think of the beach in Baja California, or the beach cafes at Fregene.

Just north of the track where the road forks east and west at Na Trang I saw some spook activity but as it was now broad daylight, and the highway was Federal controlled, there was no problem.

We reached a small roadhouse near Qui Nhon about three in the afternoon, and

we took a break, as there was plenty of space, and we'd seen nothing for several hours, apart from civvies. We sat down at a table where some deadlegs from the 57th Armored were getting-in their meal break, and they joined us for a while. I noticed that several of them were drinking, and privately asked their officer to cool them down;

"Take it easy," he said, "they've seen too much action lately and we're taking the APC's back South before anything gets to be a problem! They need to loosen up a bit!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Hasn't anyone told you that the rains'll start any time now!"

"Literally?"

"Anytime!"

"But I was told that we would be safe for quite a few days yet"

"As you get further North it becomes more difficult to decide....they just happen when they feel like it"

That was great news!

I told my driver, but he just shrugged his shoulders and kind of rolled his eyes. Well, we decided to stay there where we

could get a decent bed for the night and get up to Quang province the following day.

We woke late the following morning and saw other columns passing Southwards; then we drove up the old Route Nationale 1, signposted with those little white-on-blue signboards that always remind me of France, but now the wheels were getting crusted with reddish soil, and the clouds up ahead had changed colour, to a kind of torpid khaki; which of course had me worried; I enquired of the Fed, who said very little, just kept his eyes fixed on the road as I scanned the side, and nervously checked again where the Kalashnikov was under his seat.

By this time we had passed Binh Dinh, and we took the left fork where the road begins to go through some paddy fields and some miles later began to break through into wide areas of mostly cultivated land fringed by the normal dense bush, but away from the hills which I always associate with Vietnam; it reminded me

more than ever of a beautiful tropical Lorraine, though now the road had more or less turned from tarmac to stone and sometimes sand. It was then that the road wound away for several miles, slowly climbing until at length the Artic puffed and then crested over a long slope. Something had been troubling me for some hours, and now I turned in the seat as we crested the rise and scanned the way ahead.

The light was beginning to fade, and the scene was very beautiful under the lowering clouds; most of all the colours were extraordinary, reds and purples and blues stacked together with grays and oranges and yellows, against that impossible backdrop of deep blue sky and white puffy clouds, like smoke drifting against the background of brown and deep-green hills.

Suddenly it hit me: we hadn't seen anything move for at least twenty miles, on those normally industrious roads. There had been no traffic on the road, no people in the fields, no passers-by, such as they ever were, for as long as I could recall.

The little Fed had shrunk even

closer against the khaki-red speckle finish of the seat (funny how your mind picks out things like that; I thought to myself : 'Won't show blood-spatters, perhaps?' - after all, they think of everything in the military.) The Marines say that they always promise to get you home, even if there are just a few small pieces left. Is that touching, or awful?

But the Fed wasn't worried about such things; he began to talk about his family and his brothers....

Then he took out the Kalashnikov from under the seat, and caressed it like a baby.

We stopped for a rest, and I decided to open the sealed orders and maps for the dumping ground; we also ate some rations and drank a couple of whisky's to get our dander's up.

AS detailed on the specially printed sheets the route seemed quite simple, and indicated the road from just south of the Quang Triangle (as we called it), a few miles ahead, picking out small road stops and suspected areas of infiltration.

Now, that was a laugh! It was well known that every third person in the countryside was probably a Goon in disguise, that it was as likely that the old man on the road who gave you directions was a farmer as it was that he would blow your brains out the moment you turned your back.

Such is life!

I asked the little Fed what he thought of the situation, and he said:

"Either we're lucky, or the Intel's have got it right this time; the rain season is soon, and the Goons've begun to draw back before it starts, which leaves us where we are..."

That stung a bit.

After a few miles going north we turned left off the main highway, and I had to gun the White's engine in order to get it organized as it slithered over old cart tracks. The earth was now unmade, and broken. We passed several women planting crops in a tiny field; none of them paid the truck the slightest attention, as if they had

lived on the Pennsylvania Turnpike for their entire lives; and yet trucks like this one must have been unknown so far off the main road.

I should explain that ten miles off the road on an unmade surface is not a natural place for a truck to go, especially one with such a large trailer. But our White had the right stuff as well as the right suspension, and could make it.

So we bumped along, until I had that sinking feeling that we had probably crossed the border and were snaking along it on the northern side; at that time we were following the course of a brook which my Fed guide swore would be a river in torrent

" ..When the rains come.."

Finally, and after more than a pair of paranoia attacks, my maps indicated we were to leave the trailer to its fate behind the side of a hill, where an outcrop filled the available slack in the break of the plain.

I jumped down and began to unlock the trailer, using the winch which levers the trailer legs upright. This should be a simple operation, but the ground was so uneven that the little Fed had to re-start the engine and gun it to move the trailer slightly until there was sufficient flat ground beneath it.

This took quite a time, and finally I was breathing a little faster, as much by exertion as by the fact that the air had become sickly sweet and thick with moisture, and my sweat was making puddles on the red earth.

In spite of my training I kept on imagining rifle sights trained on my shorn head, and began to cuss and blind when the machinery refused to budge. The Fed, for his part, hardly moved, just sticking his head over the trailer's roof and scanning the horizon without making a break on the continuity of the skyline, so as not to present an easy target. That would be too easy!

His pink ears stuck out on either side of his crash hat like two wrong handles on a teapot.

I remember a flight of Chinese Geese swooping over the trailer and then re-orientating as they flew northwards.

Finally, as the little Fed activated the transponder on the roof-hump of the trailer and jumped down, his feet sank into the red clay, and he laughed as he unstuck them.

"Aha! *they* would have trouble moving on damp ground like this!"

At that moment I remembered, for some reason which I cannot explain, the Haardt Mountains, in a sort of flash, and a particular trail that I often followed when walking there. Then I remembered the deep snow, and the darkling thickets as the winter sun sank down. That was it, the fact of the particular quality of the sound at that moment, like deadened sounds in the snow.

There were moments in those hills in Germany, when one could hear, if you listened really hard and ceased all movement, the tiny sounds of birds and creatures moving ever so slightly. One afternoon I had sat down on a hill trail for a rest, and sat there for some moments admiring the view. So still was I, that the various creatures of the forest began to accept me as being something that had residence there, and they began to move around me; and then I had noticed the head of a vixen, propped unmoving on the side of her burrow, and I expect, watching me. The only thing that was moving was her extraordinary eyes.

And then she was gone. Literally, as fast as a -wink, that beautiful thing was gone. I felt a real sense of loss; I wanted to live there, like her. At that moment in the hills I felt that I could love her just like a woman; I don't know why. Just then, like a sudden cut on a tape, the forest around me swung back into vision and sound like a door suddenly slamming. BANG! I was leaning against a tree at the side of the field, with my weapon hanging

on one arm, rolling a joint, and feeling my feet beginning to settle into the red mud, slowly turning redder, and more like blood as the horizon turned crimson with a huge block of purple-ish grey sprayed across the top of it. On a distant hilltop behind us a column of white smoke had already erected itself on tip-toe.

“What was that?”

“Fuck knows, corporal!”

I checked my watch and saw that it was getting late. The Fed was sitting in the truck, having smeared earth and cached foliage around the sides of the tractor cab, which we would now use to return with. Now the White looked to all the world as if it were some perverse float in the Mayor’s parade in New York City; all that was needed were a few nudes spread across the bonnet and we’d be driving directly into NYC round the next turn in the track.

Which incidentally petered out after the next hundred yards, so that the map was now useless. So we turned with

great difficulty and began to backtrack, bumping across country with the springs bonging and the cab now rolling wildly.

We left the trailer, now all uncanny in the light, covered with a coating of water globules like sweat; the perfect studio shot of a can of beer, cool as ice, bathed in the Infra-Red-Ultra-Violet spectrum.

Peculiar and deadly.

I expected that we would pass the group of women that we'd passed before, planting something or other, but after the next klick or so the dark was beginning to come down fast and hard, and we bumped along in silence, without lights; the risk of visibility this close to Hostiles being too great.

The transponder relay in the cab beeped as the Fed tried the frequency.

"It's working"

I could imagine its twin in the trailer beeping mutely in response.

We bumped along for more miles, and the track seemed even rockier than it had

before;

"We must be near the road"

"No, we've passed it"

"Where the Fuck are we?"

"Ask a policeman"

We stopped the White and reversed into a gully, where we could at least command a certain outlook, and not be seen too easily. We checked the compass that I'd brought along, and found that it swung a little, and that around here you could be up to fifteen degrees at least out on a bearing.

"Shall we stay here the night"

"OK- I watch first and you sleep. I'll wake you around midnight"

"Yeah"

I slept fitfully, and was glad when he woke me: I was all over sweat by then, and to reinforce my discomfort it had begun to rain outside the cab; the windows were smeared, and suddenly I had the screaming hab-dabs that the motor wouldn't start when we opened it in the morning, or that

the points would be damp or something. The Fed said that we'd crossed through the neutral zone at that had parallel, and we were probably still across the border, in the North.

My hackles crept and my hands were unsteady in the darkness. They were better at times like this than we were. I could visualize them walking along the tracks and sniffing to smell the diesel. I cursed the smell of oil and the black plume the White always left behind it.

God! Was I was scared, for the first time in a long time. It was the futility of sitting there waiting for them to find us.

This wasn't just a friendly drive around Monte Mario! Now the rain was getting really heavy, and someone could be a foot from the windscreen and you wouldn't see him; that's how heavy it gets in those places. I sat there and sweated, my heavy fatigues wringing wet.

I put a hand into the canvas of the

jumping cape to find the packet of Chesterfield I carried there and found that the cellophane wrapper was all beaded with condensation.

But the Zippo worked, and flared a huge plume of steamy red flame. Then the Fed woke.

"Don't do that Chris'sake!"

I put the cigarette out.

"They smell the smoke?"

"They'll smell us!"

Then he went back to sleep.

Two hours later, I saw a pink flickering on the South horizon, and then another tower of white smoke and a muted, BANG!

That was what we called a 'Nam dawn.

You can imagine the thick warm atmosphere and the dripping rain - like Summer Rain back home, the colours of dawn in the sky and the thick foliage on the border there, and then an impact; it looked like one of their home-made rockets impacting there, several miles away, just over the horizon.

Sudden death, and then breakfast. In

a sunny, exquisite tropical dawn.

Shadows began to develop.

Then they were lengthening and stretching, and I was breaking-open the release on a can of self-heating soup and pouring it into an empty tin can which I had cleaned out with rainwater.

Suddenly there was some yawling, and the sound of a Bird, or fowl of some kind shrieking in the thicket next to our cab, and a mongoose ran pell-mell across the bonnet of the White pursuing I don't know what.

At which the little Fed woke with a start.

"Ouch!" he said, as his head met the rim of his helmet.

We drove across the red, sometimes rutted earth, for some distance, now always trying to keep a heading South, but of course obstructed by the dense forest and the little breast-like hills on this peculiar flood-plain. We kept the sight of the rising Sun to our left, and every ten minutes or so I hopped out and tried to take a bearing

with my Taiwanese marching compass, which steadied as we left the strong magnetic field of the transponder in the cab, but then began to buck as (I suppose) the magnetic field of the underlying rock strata took over from that of the White.

At length we had bounced a long five Klicks approximately, southwards, when we arrived at a deep ditch.

As I said earlier, there was this extraordinary lack of movement at this end of the country; while I was sure the forest teemed with little people in black pyjamas, the country through which we passed was pregnant with emptiness and expectancy; something was to be born, something was empty - and would be filled.

It was pretty uncanny.

The White squelched to a halt on the lip of the ditch, and I realized that from where we were we were a sitting target, nicely perched on someone's skyline, square and high, and worse still, probably metallic and emitting back-radiation from the equipment on board.

I took out the maps and we took what looked to be a bearing and tried to

evolve a strategy: but, of course our nearest line-of-sight geographical feature was several miles away, and we had first to cross the deep ditch, which would in itself be quite a victory.

Well, ditches can't extend for ever, so we drove along it, across the fields, leaving a very visible track, sometimes almost down to the differential in the mud, and eventually found a narrow wooden bridge of two or three planks, spanning the width of the ditch, which had obviously been built to join the two narrow tracks which met at this point; one converging from the mountains behind us, one, maddeningly, which took a course from the far side of the ditch directly for the blue mountains towards which we should be going.

That was hopeless.

We drove several more clicks west, and the air was beginning to thicken.

The Fed said, without inflection or notable emotion;

"It's the rains"

"The Rains?"

"The Monsoon"

"My God!"

"Hostiles don't fight in the rains!"

Again we slithered to a halt, this time under the branches of a huge banyan tree, which gave pretty good cover.

We consulted the maps again.

"Where the Fuck are we?"

"I think we're here" Said the Fed, gesticulating at the map.

I looked through the rear window of the tractor and suddenly realized that the broad sunlight had now given way to a deep purple overlay of cloud, through which, every now and then, a zigzag of electricity see-sawed it's way silently and violently. Drama, in silence.

I figured that there was a crossing indicated on the maps given me for the drop, and we headed for that.

But these maps were specific, in fact I had had instructions to destroy them as soon as we'd made the drop, and the edges were now the extreme edges of our line of knowledge. Soon we would be over the

edge and have to rely upon general road maps and our sight bearings.

Again we bumped across the edges of battered paddy-fields and cane-breaks and now it was mid-afternoon. We stopped to have a bite, broke open the first of the K-Rations and chewed hard biscuits. We had some beer left over and drank that. Then we took a break, and as I leaned back to digest my food, the Fed jumped to his feet and hung out of the window with extraordinary energy, waving.

There, over the hills which were still on our horizon, but now fringed by a strong honey-colored light, as the sun began to descend we saw two helicopters making a fast circuit, low over the plain. As they made a small final circuit and then headed away from us (without seeing us – the darkness was quite deep by then because of the rain clouds overhead) we took a sight bearing on them and I drew a line with a protractor on the map.

At that moment the trailing helicopter, still two or three miles from us,

but still massive in the air with its rocket pods and gun ports open, exploded.

All I saw, with a sort of expected shock, was the spray of red particles starting away from its fuselage and the pale blue vivid blossom of the explosion. It must have been hit around the main spar and the tanks, for pieces rained over the hills and the forest like wickedly sparkling red rain, and the rotor blades detached themselves and flew on for some distance, whirling slower and slower until at length they side-slipped into the trees.

"God!" said the Fed "Must've been a rocket or summat!" For that meant that we were still well inside hostile territory.

I'd finished drawing the line that I'd started drawing as the trailing gunship exploded, which we agreed they were using as a return bearing and, which coincided with an approximate South bearing, and so we resolved to head that way.

My companion drew my attention to the fuel contents, which showed almost empty, and so we emptied the jerrycans of

fuel stacked up and strapped on the exposed part of the tractor arm, and both relieved my mind, and managed forty gallons for the gas tank. Then he bled the hydraulic lines while I checked the other vital signs. We dumped the containers under a tree and smeared them with mud. All at least on the tractor was to rights, but we were still on the wrong side of the drainage ditch.

We made heavy-hearted jokes about rivers and drains, but finally came to a halt under a small grove of the pine-like trees, which gave this landscape its Chinese flavor, and resolved to spend darkness there.

"I'll sleep first" I agreed. And then began to wish I'd kept quiet and taken the alternative option as the noises of nightfall began to amplify themselves.

AS SOON as the night came down there was an immense chattering from the grove of trees, and creatures began to jostle and argue. I say creatures, because in that pitch dark I could not identify a single one.

Next. A brushing, in the darkness on

the roof and the rear window, and a slight bouncing of the springs which made my pulse jump; for a second I was convinced that we were about to die, and almost cried out, until a furry pair of eyes pressed itself against the window, and a yellow set of teeth chattered at me. There were monkeys in the grove!

They would not leave the tractor alone, and would have taken anything that they could move. Fortunately, everything had been fastened, back at Army Corps, with a military precision usually unlikely in Quang province.

When the time came to sleep I was so tired that I said nothing. Later, I wondered how he coped with the little maniacs, but he never mentioned it.

The cab of the White, I should explain, was broad enough for four, and the stuff of the seat was of a particular weave that was warm to the touch, and so it was fairly comfortable to stretch out on in a sleeping bag or under a blanket.

That was how I slept those nights, and that was the unlikely site for my dream that night.

Normally in Combat men do not dream anything but the most nightmarish dreams, but that night I dreamt that I was sitting on the terrace at Antibes. Often one would take a friend, or sometimes one of those firm, beautiful *Niceoise* women and sit on that outcrop at Antibes, on the East side of the town where the *Mairie* is, and watch the waves roll in, whisper sweet nothings, and occasionally kiss. Such nights in summer are the very scent of eternity.

In Winter, the pattern was very much the same.

But often I would leave the Bar 'Les Crystals' (at Juan Les Pins), pick-up my car and drive those two hundred metres out of the tinsel lights and then to the shore at Antibes again, renewed and clear and warm, where often the spray from the endless ocean would spatter the windscreen with pearls of salt, swiftly purged by the whip of the wind and the rain.

Such moments.....

At such moments then, the whip of the wind would stir the car and roll it gently on its springs, and the rain would beat against the windows and who knew what was happening inside the car..!

And at that moment I woke.

The Little Fed had opened the door and then slammed it, taking his Kalashnikov with him, and the new rain whipped across the bonnet and crackled against the shaded brown glass of the windows.

It was somewhat after dawn that day, and the water splattered in continuous waves that flowed like comically tattered curtains across the plain.

The cab of the White was hosed with water too, spattering it with soil which was then hosed away by the next curtain of spray. Additional rivulets ran down the windscreen and windows, and bounced tiny waterfalls off the exposed body parts. The cab was beginning to look just a little rusty;

but perhaps that was the visual effect of the matt drab military camouflage

I hauled myself into a sitting position and cleared my head. Just in time for my companion to materialize out of the spray, open the door, throw the Kalashnikov in and mount the tractor, at the double.

"Let's get the fuck out of here..."

"What?"

"Let's get the fuck out of here!"

Without further comment he pressed the heater button and then fired the engine; put the White into gear and started more or less straight ahead for the distant hills to the West.

He drove for ten minutes and then relaxed, sweating; I could see that he had been checking the mirror, but now he concentrated on the track ahead.

"We were sitting a hundred metres from a Hostile dugout", he said

"You mean a dugout system?"

"Right over the top!"

"My God!"

He kept driving.

"Lucky its gonna rain", he said.

"Yeah, lucky!"

We had progressed several miles when the ditch on our left suddenly disappeared and we were free to cut south.

A feeling of sudden freedom, and a question mark in the air.

For an hour we rolled over a slightly dusty landscape towards those tantalizing blue fringed mountains, until we were in their approaches and we stopped to take a bearing.

In our haste we had rolled right off the target maps which I had, and now had only general Military Road Maps and an ordinary tourist map of uncertain date to go by. I destroyed the target maps, as I had been required to, thirty-six hours before, and we fixed a triangulation 'Using Visual Fixes on Physical Terrain', just the way they'd taught me at officer training school.

I remember how proud I was with those tinsel stars on my shoulders. Now, we turned on to a track that we ran across on

the bumpy and gently steaming edge of a field. Then, for the first time in twenty-four hours, we saw a group of farmers planting something using split ends of bamboo; and we rolled on and on along the meandering track, using the approximate bearings that we took whenever the skyline was visible.

You can imagine that we were becoming increasingly tired and strained; the Fed kept ominously quiet most of the time, but occasionally exploded into curses whenever something seemed to be spoiling our prospects of some achievement, however small.

There were some unneeded tense moments.

Suddenly, and very unwelcome, the sky was closing-in, and it was beginning to spatter with rain again.

Rivulets once more began to make patterns down the windscreen, and the wipers rhythmically and slowly scre-eeked

across our sightline.

The White rolled like a landing craft in heavy seas on the broken ground, and we overhauled the first buffalo cart I'd seen for days, but paid for that feat in motion sickness. Then we passed a tiny hamlet of battered huts, but without a face to greet us; and then, as the rain began to quicken, we suddenly hit a carriageway of sorts that drove a slow leftwards curve through a grove of those familiar pine-like trees.

Then suddenly we were at the end of the track and at a T-Junction, the crossroads of a metaled road that progressed in both directions. East, and West.

“I've never seen this road”

"Well, it must be on one of our maps!"

“I've just never seen this road!”

Well, we never located it, or for that matter found out anything further about it. Perhaps it had been started and abandoned years before, and judging by the laid metal surface it could have been a road engineered by the French, or for that matter

our side: anyway, it was a road without traces. And road signs, for that matter, no signs at all. We took a break then; and the road surrendered no secrets to us, I never saw any vehicle on that road.

We watched for a long time, some hours, hoping that we would see a friendly vehicle or convoy; even an APC or unit in combat: but nothing moved. At length it was up to us to move.

Now I was beginning to get worried about fuel; that was the reason behind waiting at the cross of the road, to conserve our scarce juice. We had to find fuel. I'd calculated that the fuel we needed was a minimum of one full tank and a further forty gallons. The White would burn almost anything; but we had nothing to trade - nor to burn.

Then we saw a helicopter gunship. It screeched low over the trees heading apparently almost due east. So by common logic and consent we took the eastward direction on the steeled road, looking for signs.

After making a few clicks we stopped.

The night was dark, very dark, no moon through the clouds; the forest was thick around the road and we couldn't take the risk of using lights. It would be best to wait for first light in order to progress onward.

We both slept very fitfully. The White was in effect a sitting target. I had a continual cold shiver down the back of my neck as if water were dripping from the lip of my helmet down the back of my jumping smock. Every time I checked it, there was no trace of damp; rather, I could feel that I was almost feverish with a combination of tiredness and stress.

My continuous nervous fidgeting began to gnaw at the nerves of my companion. He occasionally flashed a vicious pair of eyes at me, and stilled my movement.

Then, directly before dawn it began to pour and pour, more heavily than before, obscuring all vision. The downpour

continued for four hours, at which the little Fed merely shrugged his shoulders:

"This is the beginning of the rains...It'll be like this for weeks!"

"Can we make a move?"

He shrugged and shifted his face a tad without the slightest change in the mask:

"Let us go on." Almost an order.

We drove for another hour, making only slow progress, and then ahead of us as the carriageway cut under dark tall trees, now overgrown so much so that they made the road narrow on either side, we could see that in the roadway there were humps or gaps cut in the netting of the road surface.

"Fuck!" said the Fed - *"Fucking Claymores!."*

It was too late. There was a loud bang and a rattling, and the White slewed as one of the traction tires turned to shreds

and added to the explosion of the mine with its own little story.

"Oh, Shit!"

The Fed climbed carefully from the cab. Claymore mines are no joke. Whoever had spread these damn mines along the carriageway had not thought that friendly traffic would come this way.

We had skidded to rest by a small track, or perhaps the remains of a semi-made road. Either way there was little choice. We limped along the track, losing water from the radiator, the rear screen cracked from the concussion of a steel ball, oil seeping out of the cracked differential, and the oil contents gauge at zero. To make things worse, the rear wheel rim, without its tire, bumping and jarring on a rock or banging into a hole, the whole rig skewing and the exhaust stuttering and banging.

Through a ruined, burned-out village; past the familiar but terrible monstrous pile of bones and ragged clothing turned to shreds.

We rolled for some miles.

And then the track turned a sharp bend and negotiated a hump in the road.

In front of us was an ancient steel bailey bridge, rusty and buckled where someone, sometime in history had tried to blow it and failed, and on the other side a high gate made of that drab green dense formless plastic material that they mould those fast Patrol Boats from, all in one piece.

It was unmistakably American Military.

We looked at each other.

The rain teemed down.

My neck developed that freezing ghostly cold water drip. I took my helmet off and wiped the imaginary water away with my camouflage net veil.

Well?"

"Chrissake.... I not know!"

"You're my Fucking guide!"

"I never hear about this place"

I noticed that the river was welling over its banks. So did my guide.

"That's the river overflowing..!"

"Chrissake I know you Goddam know that...!"

"Well?"

"Well..?"

"Now we're stuck here until it unfloods..!"

"Why?"

"This here is a flood-plain..!"

"Chrissake..!" I put my cape on, and climbed out of the cab. The downpour was still very heavy, and the river inched up. I saw the bridge lurch.

Now real water was running down my back; it dripped off the Tam-o-Shanter waterproof and the para-smock caught it neatly and funneled it nicely to the back of my neck.

"If that bridge goes you can say goodbye to your fuckin' pension..!"

My left boot filled with water, and began to overflow. I cursed black and blue. Tears came into my eyes. I wanted to be at Antibes, holding Eliane in my arms. But now that was all gone.

I felt a cold sort of loss. Now the leaves around the plastic gate were

steaming.

I walked up to the gate, and discovered that it adjoined a high wall of the same material which must logically contain something or other within the enclosure thus formed: and as I explored, according to my Officer Training Handbook seeking for booby-traps, I realized that here the overgrowth was such that this hidden plastic fortress must be virtually invisible; as invisible as it had been to us until we saw it from a few feet away.

I pushed against the plastic panel, and it moved, so I hauled on it and after a protesting moment it swung back with an effort.

Suddenly, unexpectedly I found that I was standing in what looked like a service forecourt, complete with a pair of Dodge GP trucks and a pair of gasoline pumps.

I was astonished. No, I was amazed.

I pulled the gate wider and beckoned the White in. I prayed that no-one had seen us on the road; that the rain would blot out both the smell and the scars in the earth from the tires and the broken rim. If we were fortunate and it rained a while longer

we could disappear into the forest until we made a decision as to where we were and what we would do.

Then I hauled the gate closed and draped creeper over it to make it even less obvious than it had been previously.

"Chrissake!" said the Fed. "What the fuck *is* this?"

"Jesus wept", I said to the Fed, "...Can't you fuckin' stop swearing..!..." We looked at each other and suddenly began to laugh.

"I don't believe this!"

"No - yeah..!..."

"No, I mean... where are we?"

"You're the damn guide!"

"Yes... But I never hear. ..! "

"O.K. Let's work it out then..!"

We took stock of this peculiar place. Peculiar perhaps because when we surveyed it, it was obviously a base that was at one time used as a general, more-or-less a garrison, centre. It was accordingly equipped and had, in miniature, everything

that a base could have within that sunken and lost perimeter of around two hundred by one hundred and fifty yards. I reasoned that it might originally have been constructed without regard to the addition of enclosing walls, but that they had been added at a later date. That much seemed logical.

Now we explored, entering through the battered wooden doors which swung automatically too behind us with that faint pneumatic squeak we knew so well from somewhere else.

First hard flooring, then deeper carpets. Almost unused!

This took us some stupefied time.

Next, we discovered that here there were sleeping quarters along one side of the garrison for around two hundred people, together with latrines, washing facilities and large stocks of foods, in sophisticated deep-freezer units, which were kept at dwell level by a small backup generator that had kicked-in automatically when the compound had been abandoned, whenever that was; they contained voices from my recent past, ridiculously dislocated voices for someone deep in a teeming forest: mostly back-home

foods. The kitchens were large and capable of handling that sort of volume; when we checked the diesel and petrol stock tanks we found that though almost empty (they were of thirty-thousand gallon size) there remained hundreds of gallons in each of them.

Then I broke through the hasp on a door and found a large commissariat store locked away; pads of lists showed that a precise tally had been kept of all stores; they had Cameras, Frozen Chickens by the hundred, Cauliflower, Chewing gum by the pound, Contraceptives, Chow-Mein in packs of five or ten pounds, Cassette Recorders, Film Cameras and Films to fit. I read through the stock list and gaped; it ran, of course, with military precision from A to Z, and included a couple of crated jeeps and a large stock of small arms.

The Fed appeared at the door;

"I've found the generators"

"Turn them on, but watch for visible lights"

"I close all the shutters"

The shutters along the long room/bar/ restaurant annex/Post-Exchange counter were electrically operated and blast

proof. They burred down and clacked locked.

I suddenly felt safe, for the first time in several days. Next, I turned-on the burnished Gaggia, and found that with a bit of teasing, it worked: we drank Cappuccino for the rest of our stay.

The rain continued to pour away outside, and darkness had fallen.

The sound of a muted starter, a muttered curse and the chatter and burr of a motor, coughing and then starting.

Lights flickered along the bar, and caught, and suddenly I was sitting in a downtown bar in Alberquerque or San Fran; the red coin-operated fridges came on, the telephones tinkled and buzzed with energy (though they never worked), the naked girls pinned behind the Message board flashed their tits at me, and the television flickered, and came on too.

"My God!"

I had almost to pinch myself to remember that I was lost, deep in a hostile-

held forest and marooned, as well as probably posted missing.

Then for the first time in many days I stripped-off the filthy uniform I was wearing and had the most unexpected and enjoyable shower I've ever had, scrapped my sweat-streaked clothing and kitted myself out from the quartermasters store, fresh from head to toe, allowing myself a change of clothing each day.

Suddenly we had assumed the normal behaviour that we would back in an Army situation, even the bureaucratic approach began to show it's stripes; you see, we were leveling and normalizing ourselves.

The following morning, after around ten hours unbroken sleep, my companion and I strolled through to the main office, situated behind an ancient neon sign for Coca-Cola which obstinately winked at irregular intervals, and found it derelict.

"They've destroyed all the records!" There was no record of anything remaining: the filing cabinets hung open, there were papers on the floor, among them dollar bills, and out in what must have been a small parade or muster area was a patch of burnt ground with a fringe of battered and smeared remnants of papers.

We spent a good couple of days sitting at the longroom bar, drinking bourbon and coke, and playing the jukebox.

I found a couple of Short Wave sets in the commissariat, and I rigged them to the frame of the perimeter. They gave me perfect - reception on long-range bands, but there was silence on local transmissions. I listened to Moscow Radio in what sounded like Danish, and the BBC World Service beamed for some reason at Africa. The Voice of America played pop music.

Think about it - the ultimate surreal existence. I could sit in a pub in London and yet in the center of a rainstorm in 'Nam at one and the same time.

Bizarre, it really was.

The T. V. flickered, and if you watched it closely, images and ghosts passed across the screen, in the usual de-registered greens and reds of NTSC, but there was no sound.

We left it on permanently, in case something happened that we could use.

If I walked along into the extraordinarily live Bar at three o'clock in the morning I would find that odd ghostly flickering and a vague shadow of a face telling me something through a horizontal snowstorm of magnetic spots, that must surely be important.

Unable to sleep one night I watched a thriller I remembered vaguely, and tried to pick out the goodies from the baddies through the snowflakes.

Food had become important.

Monday I had Eggs and bacon (Packed in Kansas). It was delicious.

Tuesday, we prepared Chow-Mein from a pack, and managed to surface with food for at least ten.

Wednesday, we ate Duck, with bread sauce, boiled potatoes and courgettes from France.

Each day I had a wonderful shower, woke late and dawdled over breakfast. And the rain still came down, except during the night.

All I would need to top-off a perfect start to the day was the *Nice-Matin* and a *Batard* with a packet of Gauloises Leger, but to make up for that we had deep frozen Croissants from the store.

It was bizarre. I think that that is the only word I can find for it.

We lived behind the mask of rain, which had designed itself to never cease; the clouds had lowered their bases to obscure all the hilltops in our vicinity, and we were further isolated by the fact that the river had overflowed its banks and cut off a good slice of the country from its neighbors, making movement impossible and us perfectly safe; or so it seemed to us in our ivory dreaming tower. Imagine yourself in a small town where you don't have to find the change for anything: you can eat what you like when you like, listen to anything that they have in store, drink yourself silly, have unlimited access to expensive cameras and equipment, watch videos, if that is your wont, and play the jukebox endlessly;

manage your own use of time. Isn't that a thought!

Well, it is and it was; but with the addition of incarceration and the limitations of a Vietnamese Federal who was very far from classically educated, naturally the conversation faltered.

That was the catch: silences that took up most of your waking day.

After five days the silences were beginning to take their toll.

The Fed habitually sat at one end of the Long Bar and me at the other and we drank our tall bourbons. Beethoven played by Moiseiwitsch filled the air. The Fed was watching a blue movie on the video. All was perfect, all was quiet. The TV was on, as usual.

But then: the flickering of the T.V. faltered.

The Fed came suddenly to his feet: and rushed at the set. He cursed:

"Fuck you!", and punched at the tuning board.

Suddenly the picture was clear, and, hey-presto!, The sound was clear too.

"Shush!"

It was the news from Saigon: the Army

newscaster cut few corners; the news gave us both a horrible start, the army was pulling back, friendly elements were told to withdraw now - this very moment!

"My God!" The Fed held his head in his hands.

The following morning a friendly gunship flew low over the compound, but did not stop.

You can imagine that we were lost in horror, salvation was a mere hundred feet over our heads, and they could not see us for the mist.

On the T.V. News from Saigon we saw pictures of panic, embassy compounds with people climbing over barriers in panic; helicopters overloaded and almost pancake-ing as they took off.

We began to work, now in real, unholy haste, on one of the Dodge GP Trucks. We took an extra spare wheel from the other, filled up both tanks, and hiked fifty or so gallons in plastic jerrycans into the back. But we couldn't find a transmitter that worked, and though the three meter whip aerials on the Dodge looked useful, all I could get of local or military traffic on the

receiver I'd found in the store was A.F.N, and then only country and Western Music, and even that, pretty faint.

I lugged out some small arms, half a dozen fried chickens ('Country Style') a couple of quarts of Old Crow to keep us warm, and found a couple of packs of pancakes and syrup with that little 'Ole Colored Lady on the label; all the comfortable stuff we needed to sleep, were we to be delayed on our journey - and packed them in.

Unholy haste.

The Dodge was loaded, and we had a long way to roll.

We had made yet another approximation of our journey and our route: the little Fed thought that we must take the opposite turning along the metaled road. That seemed inescapable, that rationale developing from the fact that we had only the original maps that I'd brought in the busted White, and they were too specific to their mission

Now. For the last time I pulled open the plastic gates and heard the juke-box playing 'Brown Sugar'.

My God, that was Vietnam!

And then I closed the gates on their secrets and pulled the screen of creepers back across the tell-tale.

I never did find out what that base was; who it was for, or anything about it.

Now we were in an almighty rush; no time left, at least five hundred miles to go, and the country falling about our ears.

So we crossed the river, risking the Bailey bridge, striking the far bank quickly; you see the Dodge had four-wheel-drive.

As we touched the verge of the forest I looked back and heard the juke box playing 'Brown Sugar' again, quickly overlaid this time by the close crackle of close small-arms fire: though I never found from where, or to where it was directed.

And that was ominous.

Lucky, darkness was coming down: we could make many miles in the dusk and

the sodden, misty air. We had barely time enough to drive back to the carriageway through the forest, not that there was much choice in it, turning away from the claymores, and touching fifty at times.

Goodbye 'Brown Sugar'.

I sang that in my mind. But the Fed just looked relieved, though his face hardly moved, only continuing drops of sweat showing his tension as we pulled away through the darkness.

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