

Best We Forget

A novel of chaos, crazy conspiracy and black Aussie humor in the Vietnam War.

BERNARD CLANCY

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About the author

Bernard Clancy was a National Serviceman who served in South Vietnam in 1968-69. On his return to Australia he joined The Herald and Weekly Times in Melbourne where he worked as a sub-editor before serving in many executive positions including Design and Production Editor of the Sun News Pictorial and HWT Group Foreign Editor. In 1988 he established his own corporate communications company which advised governments, major international corporations and professional practices. He retired from corporate life in 2001, concentrating on writing full time. His other works include two highly acclaimed stage plays, Foxholes of the Mind and The Zipper.

Author's note

The events in this novel could have occurred at any time in the late 1960s or early 1970s. The fact is they did not, for while this story is certainly based on historical events and the people who were part of them, it is fiction. The characters too are wholly fictional, with the exception of a few political leaders whose manipulations determined that history. But it is the manipulated who are the subject of this narrative, and to them I am grateful, for they gave me the inspiration and determination to fly this flag. I do so in their honor, particularly my 521 fellow Australians and those many thousands from a number of nations, particularly the US, who made the ultimate sacrifice in the name of freedom. We will also never forget the hundreds of thousands of others who suffered, both physically and mentally, many still to this day.

For the cover, I am indebted to Sgt Peter Ward who allowed me to use this picture of himself taken by the late Capt. Bob Cornish; and Kevin Langille for the superb design.

CHAPTER 1

The rusty springs groaned as Donkey Simpson flopped on to his bed. He sighed loudly. Taking off his black-framed, Buddy Holly style glasses he sighed loudly and wiped the sticky sweat from his face and neck with an already soggy handkerchief, massaging the two red spots either side of his nose which his specs had irritated. What a day! He just couldn't think straight. So much had happened in the past 18 hours — the 12-hour flight from Sydney via Singapore to Saigon had been fairly uneventful . . .

. . ."and that's your cupboard there. The shower and toilet are in here and we have to share the desk."

"Eh?" said Donkey. "Sorry mate, I was a million miles away, I'm stuffed!"

"I can understand that. It was a bit rough of them to put you to work as soon as you arrived. Usually we're put through the red tape bit then sent here to settle in and sleep off the effects of the flight."

"Not much point complaining to the union, I suppose."

Corporal Peter Holyrod giggled. Donkey looked up sharply at the bloke with whom he'd have to share the room for the best part of twelve months. He was just on six feet tall, a little over an inch taller than himself. He was broad-shouldered with fair crew-cut hair, light blue fervent eyes and a face as smooth as a baby's bum. And those teeth! When he smiled they looked like a Navy regiment on parade, perfectly straight, perfectly sparkling white despite the shadow of his long, thin nose. If he smiled out in the bush like that, mused Donkey, particularly on a dark night, he'd get a bullet right in the middle. He looked about twenty, a couple of years younger than himself. He'd have to be a Nasho too, he thought.

"As I was saying," Holyrod camera-flash smiled, "that's your cupboard there, the shower and toilet are in there and we have to share the desk."

Donkey glanced around the two-bed hotel room. It seemed comfortable enough. Inch-square white tiles, flecked with green, lined the floor below lighter, lime-green painted walls. Two poorly varnished wooden cupboards stood against the wall beside the head of each bed and a poky desk nestled against the opposite wall. The bathroom, white tiled, had a toilet, commode, wash basin and a hand-held shower unit crammed into one corner. It was all very basic but clean enough. The beds were hard horse-hair mattresses over sagging spring bases but what else would one expect from the Army? At least

the sheets and cotton blankets appeared clean enough. Over the desk a photo board was plastered with Holyrod's pictures of home, family and girlfriend. If this was to be home for the next twelve months he would have to do something about evening up the family balance on that, Donkey decided. An overhead fan as big as a propeller on a Spitfire thrashed around noisily on a wobbling pin, beating the already thick, humid air. It would chop you to bits if it ever flew off, Donkey worried.

The hotel had been taken over by the Vietnamese Government on behalf of its allies as a Bachelor Enlisted men's Quarters, or BEQ, to house more than one hundred Australian Other Ranks who worked at the Free World Headquarters building, mainly as clerks. It had been dubbed 'The Canberra' by some wit and the name had stuck. The ground floor open lobby had been redesigned to include a basic bar, kitchen, dining area and small movie theatre which could be isolated somewhat by black floor to ceiling drapes. The other four floors were all rooms similar to Holyrod's and Donkey's, built around a central, airy atrium that went from the first floor to the roof with a wide stairway linking floors. Out front heavy steel mesh stretched from the floor of the third storey down and out over the footpath to the street to prevent grenades being thrown into the building. A similar mesh Judas gate barred entry to unwelcome visitors. In front of that two concrete and sand-bagged pill boxes stood guard on the street beyond yet another row of defences, white-painted 44-gallon drums filled with concrete. Any Vietnamese who ventured to within twenty feet of these battlements were waved on their way with pointed rifles and very clear messages to "fuck off Nigel!"

"I'll leave you to settle in," said Holyrod, "I'm going downstairs to eat. When you've packed your gear away come down and I'll show you around." He hesitated at the door, as though he'd forgotten something, then grinned broadly.

"You'll be sorry!" he cackled through his ivories.

“What does that mean?” Donkey asked. “I’ve heard it a dozen times today.”

"You remember, near the end of your Corps training, your CO saying 'now chaps, today all of you will be interviewed about your future in the Army and the question will be asked whether you wish to serve in Vietnam. Of course, the Government has decreed that National Servicemen do not have to go to Vietnam if they don't want to so think very carefully about your reply'."

"Yep, remember that all right," agreed Donkey.

"But most of us thought there wasn't much point hanging around Australia for two years while there was good money, no tax and war service benefits to be gained by going to Vietnam. So most of us volunteered to go. Right?"

"Well yeah, but . . ."

"So mate, you're gunna be sorry you volunteered, I can tell you!"

From how the day had gone already, Donkey was beginning to see the point.

They had flown out of Sydney on a Qantas 707 at 11 pm on April 1, April Fool's Day, which Donkey thought a touch ironic. Twelve hours later they bounced down at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport. The flight had included a short, hot and humid refuelling stopover in Singapore. What a joke that had been. Singapore's Government, unwilling to upset Hanoi by appearing to support “Australian aggression”, frowned on planeloads of khaki-clad Australian soldiers using its international air terminal to stretch their legs during refuelling. But on the other hand Singapore could not afford to upset its long-time aid partner, defender and growing trade ally, Australia. Diplomatically Singapore decided to turn a blind eye to South Vietnam-bound soldiers in its terminal so long as they wore civilian clothes.

Rather inconvenient that, said the Australian Government, but got around the problem with Shirt, Civilian, Singapore, for the use of. This was simply a shirt of your own choice, the more colorful the better. It replaced the standard issue Army khaki shirt on touchdown at Singapore so that the 90-odd young men on each weekly flight, dressed in Army issue khaki slacks, spit polished, distinctive military black shoes and khaki socks, all with similarly styled, short haircuts, could wander around the terminal building officially incognito, their outfits completed with the disguise of Shirt, Civilian, Singapore, for the use of.

And that flight approach to Saigon! There were bomb craters everywhere, ugly green-water filled pock marks in the fields and rice paddies surrounding the airport. Here was the real war — and he was heading right into it.

Gripped with a mix of excitement, apprehension and not a small portion of fear, he collected his kitbag and was standing around with the other soldiers on his flight, wondering what happened next, when he heard himself being paged to report to the Arrivals desk. He found it quickly and was greeted by a sandy-haired Transport sergeant with a grin a mile wide.

"Private Simpson?"

"Yep."

"You'll be sorry!" He offered his hand to Donkey. "Billy Matthews is the name. Got a weapon?

“No.”

“Great. Hope Charlie doesn’t start a war on the way to HQ or you’re fucked. Follow me."

Matthews, his Armalite rifle held loosely in his right hand, headed out of the terminal into the stifling heat and sauntered towards the carpark, Donkey trailing, eyes flashing left, right, left looking for bad guys pointing rockets in their direction. As they pushed through the terminal’s swinging doors, Donkey was almost knocked over by a big man in a green camouflage suit. He was at least six feet three inches tall and broad shouldered. Aviator sunglasses beneath a battered officer’s cap studded with three gold stars shaded a stern, determined expression clamped around a huge cigar. Donkey quickly realised he was staring at an American general, which was startling enough, but what really grabbed his attention were the cowboy-style sixguns, complete with pearl handles, on each hip. He pushed past, ignoring Donkey, and marched fixedly into the terminal. Matthews saw the stunned expression on Donkey’s face. “Man, you ain’t seen nothin, yet,” he drawled dryly. “There’s more crazies per square mile in this country than the rest of the world.” Donkey laughed nervously, not realising he would meet that general again — and he wouldn’t much like it.

Swinging himself into a dull khaki but clean Land Rover, Matthews turned to Simpson. "Dump your kit in the back and we'll be off." Donkey did so and climbed in beside Matthews, who looked at him quizzically.

"You really a private?" he asked.

Donkey was taken aback. "Yeah, why?"

"It's not every bloody day that personal transport is ordered by the Chief Of Staff for a baggy-arsed private, mate. The other blokes who came over with you will go into town on a shitheap Septic bus."

"Oh," said Donkey, "I don't understand."

"Neither do I, mate. Well, shouldn't have asked, I suppose. Not supposed to ask fucking questions in this man's army, are ya. Mind in neutral, that's the lad. Isn't that what they say?" He turned his attention back to the road. "Get outta the way, ya stupid fuckin' Nog!"

Donkey still didn’t understand but his attention had been grabbed by the amazing sights of Saigon. As Matthews weaved the Land Rover through

millions of motor scooters and motorbikes, pushbikes and the blue and yellow clapped out relics of French Peugeot taxis, he saw a huge, filthy, stinking slum. People wandered listlessly among roadside huts made from cardboard boxes and slabs of American beer-can stamped sheet metal; rubbish, filth, refuse, dumped everywhere. Buildings, filthy, old, dilapidated, falling to pieces.

The stench almost turned Donkey's stomach inside out. Exhaust smoke from the motorbikes blued the air. And God, it was *hot!* He had stepped out of the air-conditioned plane into a blast furnace. Within two minutes his shirt was saturated with sweat.

How Matthews didn't kill someoneDonkey didn't know. The roads were like suicide alleys, so jam-packed that the maximum speed attainable appeared to be about twenty miles per hour. They drove through three intersections which had traffic signals. None worked. Traffic of all descriptions, including pedestrians, criss-crossed slowly in a cacophony of bleating horns and curses. Donkey was amazed — and it showed. Matthews laughed.

"It's only light today, mate. Wait ’til you see a real traffic jam."

It seemed to Donkey that the rule of the road was to drive on the right but the practice appeared to be to find a hole in traffic and storm straight into it before somebody else beat you to it, like playing Chinese checkers with no rules.

After what seemed like an hour but was probably far less, Matthews swung the Land Rover off a main road and through a gate guarded by Vietnamese soldiers in a small pagoda-like pillbox.

A sign over the gate proclaimed "Free World Forces. Headquarters". The building was five storeys and massive, dominating the surrounding neighborhood, a sandy, muddy cream shimmering dully in the heat haze. Flags of all Allied nations in the conflict against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army fluttered from a line of flagpoles above the building's Roman foyer. The compound's grounds, which covered about three acres, were surrounded by an eight-foot chainwire fence topped with rolls of concertina barbed wire. Rusting shipping containers and military vehicles of all sorts were scattered around.

Matthews drove past the front entrance and around the building to a corrugated iron shed leaning against the main building. It was Headquarters Company, he explained, and Donkey should report to the Officer in Charge

there.

Donkey strode into the HQ shack lugging his bag. The shed was like a sauna. Four portable fans placed at strategic points around the room whined at top speed. A sweat-soaked corporal raised weary, oily eyebrows. A look of total disinterest and boredom was etched deeply into the grimy, leaking pores of his face.

"Yeah?" he groaned. It seemed an effort for him to get just that one word out.

"Private Simpson reporting for duty, corp. I've just come in on the charter . . ."

The mere mention of his name appeared to revive the corpse. "Private Simpson!" he exclaimed, eyebrows leaping. "Ay sir," he yelled over his shoulder, "Private Simpson's 'ere!"

"Simpson!" The bellow came from a cubby hole somewhere in the rear of the hut that Donkey couldn't see. "Thank bloody Christ for small mercies." A grin appeared around a doorway followed by a wispy topped sweating head, then by shoulders with major's crowns attached. Simpson snapped to attention and saluted.

The major ignored him, thrusting out his hand in a very un-officer like gesture of welcome. Donkey didn't quite know what to do. Privates simply didn't shake hands with majors! But the hand was there, he couldn't very well ignore it. He dropped his salute awkwardly and grasped it. Everything was becoming more confusing by the minute.

"Delighted to see you mate," said the major. "Don't know what I would have done if you weren't on that bird. Now, the corporal here will allocate you with a rifle — which, incidentally, you must take everywhere you go — fix all the paperwork etcetera and as soon as you're finished I'll take you up to the general myself."

"General, sir?" queried Donkey, mystified. "I'm terribly sorry sir, but I'm totally confused. Why do I have to see a general? What have I done? I've just got off the plane."

The major looked at Donkey in astonishment. "Don't tell me, Private Simpson, that Canberra didn't tell you what your posting was?"

"No sir."

"God," he groaned. "Well that's typical bloody Canberra, I suppose. Private Simpson, the reason I'm so delighted to see you is because you’re COMAFV's new personal secretary, the crash-hot shorthand-typist that he's

been screaming for. And the sergeant you're replacing went home today on the plane you came in on. Iif you weren't on that I'd have my arse in a sling."

"Com-what sir? General? I'm sorry sir, I still don't understand."

The major was becoming a little exasperated. "COMAFV is the general. Commander, Australian Force, Vietnam. COM-AFV, get it? The big chief of all Australians in Vietnam. You're his secretary."

Donkey went white. A general's secretary! Crash-hot shorthand-typist? His brain went into a whirl. What, me? I haven't got a word of shorthand! During his journalism cadetship on his local paper Donkey had tried to learn Pitmans but had never been able to grasp it. Where had the Army got the idea from that he was a crash-hot shorthand writer?

Suddenly it slapped back into his brain. Way, way back, when he had answered the call of his marble, he had to report to the local Public Service office to register and the bloke who had helped him fill out the forms had been a golfing mate, Ron.

"What do you want to do when you get into the Army?" he had asked Donkey.

"Well, I don't want to carry a bloody rifle, that's for sure. I'd love to get into Public Relations, you know, sort of continue my writing career."

"Right. We'd better give you every chance. What typing speed do you have?"

"Aw hell, I dunno. I bang along with two fingers at about thirty words a minute I suppose."

"Mmm, that's no good. We'd better put down eighty."

"Eighty! Christ, I can't get anywhere near that!"

"You want to carry a gun?"

"No, but . . ."

"We put down eighty. Now, what about shorthand?"

"As a matter of fact, it's shithouse. Can't understand it. All that bloody phonetic spelling. I just can't think that way, I think of a word the way it's spelt, not said. Always did get ten out of ten for spelling."

"Right. How does one hundred and twenty words a minute sound?"

"Shit! I can see this getting me into trouble some day."

"Nah, she'll be right. Just bullshit your way through. Everybody else in the Army does."

As Donkey stood there facing the major in the Headquarters tin shed in Saigon, a million miles away from his home town in Gippsland, Victoria, he

remembered his mate's advice . . . and decided that the first form of his "bullshitting his way through" would be silence.

"The general's secretary, sir? No, I wasn't told. I wasn't told anything sir. Are you sure there hasn't been some kind of mistake?"

The major shuffled his paperwork. "No, no, no Private Simpson, I have all the relevant paperwork on your posting right here in your personal file. You're it all right." Donkey's heart sank.

An hour later he was being introduced to the Chief of Staff, the Army's Number Two man in Vietnam, a Brigadier for God's sake! A Red Hat! Donkey had seen only one other in his life and that had been at his recruit passing out parade at Puckapunyal: the Reviewing Officer, miles away, on his little podium. And here he was on the other side of the world shaking hands with one! It was all too much in one day. I'm dreaming all this, thought Donkey. It's just not real!.

It was. The major was quite effusive in his introductions, the brigadier "delighted to meet you, Private Simpson, I'm sure we'll get along well once you settle in."

He can see the terror on my face, Donkey thought.

Brigadier Paul Anthony Bradshaw appeared a kindly man. Around fifty, Donkey guessed, he stood six feet two, straight as a ramrod topped by red-blonde thinning hair. His blue eyes smiled from beneath incongruously bushy, threatening, pure blond eyebrows. His hands were large and covered with equally blond and bushy hair. His smile was natural and friendly, comforting, his teeth yellowed from smoking. His grand children would have adored him.

The general, the brigadier explained, was out and wouldn't be back for an hour or so. "However, meet the rest of the team here . . . Second Lieutenant Peter Sproule, the general's Aide . . ."

Sproule was about Donkey's age, 22, and a big, impressive looking bloke. Six feet three, blonde crew-cut, piercing blue eyes, an artillery badge on his cap, the type of chap who would have been captain of his school cricket and football teams and the smartest kid in class too. But his smile made Donkey uneasy. It appeared to be gently twisted by a touch of sadism. Trouble there, Donkey thought.

". . . and my secretary, Corporal John Nickoli." Nickoli looked like a weasel wearing a baby mouse on its top lip. He squeaked like one too. He was a couple of inches shorter than Donkey, of medium build. Thin, mousy

hair flopped down over his forehead. His smile was sly, his eyes green and deep-set, the moustache sparse, thin and dirty grey, desperately in need of growth hormones. God, thought Donkey, with this lot, what's the general going to be like?

"Normally," said the brigadier, "we'd send you back to your quarters to settle in but we're snowed under here at the moment. I wonder if you'd mind starting work immediately?"

It was a request, not an order. Donkey liked that. In his experience, requests had never been Standard Operating Procedure in this man's army, rather the opposite. The brigadier handed him over to Nickoli who showed Donkey around the three-room COMAFV office suite, his own desk, typewriter and files. Flanking the central office, which Sproule, Nickoli and now Donkey would use was the general's spacious, map-lined but otherwise sparse office on the left and Brigadier Bradshaw's office on the right. Once the short tour was over, Nickoli dumped a great pile of paperwork in front of Donkey.

"Type that," squeaked the corporal. It was an order and Donkey didn't like that at all but Nickoli had two hooks on his arm. Donkey sat down behind an old black Remington typewriter and was soon so engrossed in the puzzle of his new correspondence that he didn't notice the general bustle in.

"Tenshun!" squeaked the corporal, leaping from his chair like an uncoiling spring, arms ramrod straight beside his trousers, thumbs down the seams, terror quivering his lips. For a moment Donkey thought someone must have been dangling a piece of cheese from the ceiling. He was somewhat slower off his chair and was still unbending when the general steamed past, flicking a glance in his direction. Suddenly he stopped and turned back to face Donkey.

"You're my new secretary. Good. Glad you're here. I'll see you in a few minutes." A barked, imperious command.

Major General Aloysius Laurence Melville-Smith had spent his entire life trying to live down the initials his naive parents had given him — ALMS. From his earliest school days he had been called 'Alms' and he hated it. It taught him to be aggressive and despite his small stature he had bruised quite a few mouths that dared utter the loathed nickname. However the inevitable consequence was that he was forever in trouble. His sympathetic father had come to the rescue when he was about twelve years old. When spoken, said his Dad, Alms sounded the same as Arms and while a poor man begged for

alms a soldier took up arms. The poor man was to be pitied, scorned; the soldier respected, admired, honored. From that day on little Aloysius (as his mother insisted on calling him) or Al (as his father called him) had only one burning ambition in life — to become a soldier, a general. They couldn't — wouldn't — laugh at him then.

They had though. Right through military college, Duntroon, through the junior officer ranks, right up until he became a colonel and earned his own infantry battalion to fight in Korea he had been known, behind his back of course, as 'Alms'.

It was then that things finally began to change. Initially his battalion was derided, smirked at by the entire Army, and all because of his nickname. Other battalions, with proud names like the Tigers, the Lions and the Pigs, dubbed his boys 'The Christian Soldiers'.

"Onward Christian Soldiers," they would sing derisively, "bearing Alms to war!" and then fall about laughing, blessing themselves with huge exaggeration.

This drove Al to distraction and increased his determination to make his battalion the best in the Army. He drove his dispirited troops hard and eventually the work began to pay off. The Christian Soldiers and their Commanding Officer began to win battles, medals, citations — and some respect. The battalion's image was changing and Al was determined to rid it of its cross once and for all. He did this cunningly, after a big battle in which he'd led his men gloriously and been awarded the Military Cross for it. He suggested to his 2IC that perhaps it was about time the battalion gave consideration to giving itself a nickname more in keeping with its battle honors; that, indeed, perhaps his own nickname might be changed to 'Al' . . . hell, if his men liked it, maybe even 'Big Al'. “Maybe then we could call ourselves Big Al's Barbarians," he had joked, grinning hugely. His 2IC had taken the broad hint and issued the decree. The troops loved it. The new name stuck and the Barbarians went on to become the most decorated unit in Korea and the most revered in the Army.

More importantly to the colonel, 'Alms' was gone forever. He was now 'Big Al'.

The fact that Big Al stood only five feet eight in his Army boots concerned no-one, particularly himself. Indeed, he consoled himself, Napoleon was no basketballer. His brilliant career had taken care of any suggestion he was a little man slopping around in big boots. He was a master tactician, using

lessons learned as a schoolboy.
He was still breaking enemy noses while keeping his own intact. His troops loved him for this. It meant that whenever Big Al led them into battle they could rest assured they would be pounding the bejesus out of the enemy while suffering only minimum casualties themselves.

In the few brief seconds Donkey had to study his new boss he didn't know whether he liked what he had seen. Beneath the red-banded cap was a thinning crop of once wavy brown hair, greying at the temples. The huge freckles on his pasty face had turned a nasty red in the hot tropical sun. Tiny black eyes seemed buried deep within his skull and his lips were angry red slashes that twisted condescendingly when he smiled. He had an aura of power about him. He had stood with his feet apart, hands on hips, a stance of almost childish challenge and yet Donkey got the instant impression that this man demanded — and got — instant respect.

It was only about two minutes before Lieutenant Sproule summoned Donkey into the awesome presence of the general who sat scowling behind his desk.

"Well Private Simpson," he barked, a thin, watery smile cracking open his lips, "welcome to the war. Not that you'll see much of it, stuck here in this office."

Donkey was certainly glad to hear that but wondered whether the general was rather peeved that he, too, was missing the war 'stuck here in this office.'

"Now, how's your shorthand?" Apprehensively, Donkey began side-stepping. "Shorthand. Yes sir. It's ok sir."

"Okay! What do you mean okay? How many words a minute?"

Hell, thought Donkey, he's pencilled me into a corner already! "Well sir, armmm, I don't really know. I just sort of use my own version."

"I don't care what version you use Private Simpson. According to these records of yours here, you have one hundred and twenty words a minute."

"Um, no sir, nothing like that, I wouldn't think," Donkey said apologetically before suddenly brightening. "But I can type at forty five words a minute," he volunteered enthusiastically. While the Army's basic secretarial course hadn't included shorthand, it had improved his typing speed and accuracy although the old battleaxe instructor had given up trying to convert him from a two-finger basher into a touch typist.

The general's jaw dropped, bounced off his desk and snapped shut again, all in an instant. He was not one for public shows of emotion but Donkey had

caught him by surprise.

"Forty five words a minute!" he shouted. "The sergeant you're replacing could type at double that speed!"

There was no getting around things now, Donkey knew. He had been well and truly cornered. He had to find a scapegoat.

"Sir, I think somebody's made a terrible mistake. Nobody told me I was supposed to be so good and I certainly didn't tell the Army I was Superman."

The general just sat at his desk, immobile. Struck dumb. Suddenly a flicker of hope flashed across his face. He scrambled for Donkey's papers. "You are Private Simpson?"

"Yes sir, 3791628, Private Simpson, Brian James. Donkey, sir."

"What!"

"Donkey sir. That's what they call me sir. Nickname."

"Donkey?"

"Sir."

"Donkey." The general spoke the word flatly, in disbelief. His head flopped down into his hands. They promised me, he thought morosely, one hundred and twenty words a minute shorthand, eighty words a minute typing. They told me he'd failed his jungle training but they'd passed him anyway, just for me. You beauty, I'd thought, a superstar! And what do I get? A bloody donkey! Somebody back in Canberra has got it in for me. In fact, they've made an ass of me!

Donkey thought he heard just the tiniest whimper squeeze between the general's hands. God, he thought, don't start crying, general! If anybody should be crying it ought to be me! It was the worst moment of his life. I didn't ask for this bloody job, he mused. If somebody had told me I could have put everything right before this mess got halfway through! But what's the general going to do with me now?

And then a horrifying thought shot Donkey right between the eyes. He's going to send me back! Oh no, I'll be the laughing stock of my home town! In Vietnam for one day and they gave him the arse! Ha! What a laugh! Not good enough even for the Army! ha! ha! ha! And another, even worse, thought sprang into his mind. He'll give me a rifle and send me out into the boonies! God, that would be worse than being sent home! He couldn't do that, surely! But Donkey knew this man had the power to do anything.

The general stirred, dropped his hands, lifted his head and straightened in his chair. Donkey remained at attention in the dock.

"Well Private Simpson, it appears there's nothing for it but to give you a try. But if you're not up to it you'll have to go." The verdict. Not guilty until proven so. Donkey couldn't have been more relieved.

"Thank you sir, I'll try my best. Sorry about this mess-up sir but I suppose that's the Army!"

Having just been thrown the rope to get out of the quicksand, Donkey, by saying that, had chucked it back in the general's still glowering face. The Army was his God. He's spent his life on his knees praying to the Great Army God in the mightiest of citadels. And here was this . . . this . . . bloody *donkey* crapping all over the altar!

Red blotches jumped on to the general's face. "Back to work Simpson!" he bellowed. Donkey snapped to attention momentarily and then scarpered.

"And take this report with you. I want it typed up in 20 minutes!"

Twenty minutes later, exactly, the general strode into the outer reception office. Donkey was still typing furiously, cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

"Finished that report yet Private Simpson." Not a question, a demand.

Donkey glanced up from his typewriter. "Won't be a moment, sir. Just about there."

And then the roof fell in as the general roared. "Stand to attention when you address me soldier!"

Donkey shot bolt upright, knocking his chair over backwards. Eyes straight ahead, hands fisted, thumbs down. He'd forgotten, though, in his terror, the cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

"And take that thing out of your mouth!"

Donkey's mouth fell open but the cigarette stuck to his bottom lip. From a perfectly horizontal position it slowly drooped until the burning end came to rest on his chin. Donkey squeaked, more in fright than pain, and plucked at the offending weed, knocking it to the floor. He bent to retrieve it.

"Stand to attention soldier! Leave that thing there!" The general was now apoplectic. His deep-set eyes popped incredibly, black killing eyes, squeezing his incongruously small, baby button nose, now red and inflamed with anger; feet apart, hands on hips, his fingers digging deeply into the sparse flesh. I'll bet he wishes that was my neck, Donkey thought, terrified. Stripped of his uniform, in just a lap-lap, he would make a marvellous Barbarian, Donkey trembled.

"Now get that report finished!" The general spun suddenly and steamed back into his office. Sitting back at his desk he immediately dropped his head

into his hands again. Just what, he thought, is my Army coming to!

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Donkey was snapped from his reverie by a tapping on the glass panel of his hotel room's door. "New eh," said the stranger, poking his head into the room. "You'll be sorry!" He darted off, laughing at his Joke, Standard, New Arrivals, For taking the piss out of.

Donkey thought seriously about yelling after him to fuck off but then thought better of it. The last thing he needed today was more trouble. He glanced around the room again, noticing a huge calendar over Holyrod's bed, stuck to the wall. Each day for the past three months had been carefully X-ed out. In each date square there was another, smaller, penned in number. Beneath that day's date was the figure 271, on the previous day 272 and so the numbers rose, backwards, one per day, for the previous months until the start of the Xs. Beneath the first was pencilled 365.

It didn't take Donkey long to work out what all this meant. His room-mate had 271 days of his 12-month stint in Vietnam to complete.

God, thought Donkey, I'm way back on 364! Thoroughly miserable, tired, disillusioned, he decided to forego dinner and go straight to bed. He stripped and slumped dis-spiritedly into the bathroom to clean his teeth. His normally deep-set, flecked, green eyes were red-veined, he noticed in the mirror. And his brown, college-cut hair was plastered to his high forehead with sweat. His glasses slipped down his straight nose, resting on his high but narrow cheekbones. He pushed them back up again and bared his thin lips to inspect his teeth. He thought he noticed a slight yellow tinge from smoking. He brushed them again, the white foam dribbling from his mouth into the cleft in his chin, a family trademark. Satisfied, he rinsed his mouth and looked down at his naked body. Sinewy, was probably the most flattering way to describe him, he thought. Others might call him the archetypal ninety-seven pound weakling. Five foot ten and a half and built like a greyhound. "Can't have everything as well as brains," he muttered to himself resignedly as he walked back into the bedroom and flopped on to the cool bed, pulling the single sheet over him. The fan flapped and flopped overhead in the still, stifling air. Donkey watched two geckos dart about the ceiling chasing mosquitoes and wished them luck.

Three hundred and sixty four days to go! How the hell am I going to cop that! he wondered. Suddenly he stiffened and groaned. He had just

remembered his 12-month tour of duty took in a Leap Year.

"Three hundred and sixty *five* to go," he whimpered. "If the bloody general doesn't kill me first."

CHAPTER 2

Donkey's second day in Vietnam began with a start. Holyrod was standing over him shaking him awake. "Wakey, wakey Brian or you'll miss the bus," he was saying.

Donkey rolled over before suddenly realising where he was and that Holyrod was speaking to him. It had been a long time since anyone had called him Brian. Only his family, fiancee and friends back home called him that.

"Donkey," he said.

"What?" questioned Holyrod, pulling on his shirt.

"Don't call me Brian. I told you last night, Donkey's the name. Everybody calls me Donkey, not that I like it mind you. But that's it. Ever since I've been in the Army, anyway."

"How did you get a name like that?"

"In rookies. From a smart-arse RTI." As he was dressing, Donkey told Holyrod the tale — how Corporal 'Bull' McNamara, Recruit Training Instructor or RTI in Army lingo, had bestowed it upon him during a drill session. He'd left-turned instead of right-turned or dropped his rifle or something, causing the bull to bellow.

"Recruit Simpson!" he had roared, his bovine breath fouling Donkey's face from only six inches, "you're not an idiot, you're not a useless bastard, you're not even a fuckwit or a dickhead! Because RTIs like me are not allowed to call recruits nasty names, are we! But I'll tell you what you are, Recruit Simpson: you're a bloody donkey!"

And then it had occurred to McNamara that at last, after all his years in the Army, after almost two years of making men from boys, soldiers from shit, he had finally come up with something original.

He smiled evilly, pushing his face even closer to Simpson's. He dropped his voice, but not so much that the rest of the platoon couldn't hear him. That would never do. It was his stage and the audience had to be able to hear his lines.

"Recruit Simpson, have you heard the story of your namesake?"

"No corporal," muttered Simpson.

"Pardon?"

"No corporal!" shouted Simpson, taking the hint.

"That's better, Recruit Simpson, when you have something to say we all like to hear it. Recruit Simpson, for your edification, there was a Private Simpson at Gallipoli and he became a hero. Do you know why, Recruit Simpson?"

"No corporal!"

"Well, he had a donkey, you see, and he used it to take wounded men out of the lines back to Anzac Cove. He made this trip hundreds of times, Recruit Simpson, through fire and brimstone. He was a hero, Recruit Simpson. Private Simpson couldn't possibly have been a relation of yours, now could he Recruit Simpson."

"Not that I know of corporal!"

"Of course not. Because you're more likely to be a descendant of the dumb Donkey, aren't you Recruit Simpson!"

Simpson's platoon of fellow suffering recruits had been enjoying Simpson's discomfiture. Better him than one of them. Now the grins turned to hoots of suppressed, sniggering laughter. Simpson was mortified. But he knew better than to argue with McNamara.

"If you say so corporal."

"And I do say so, Recruit Simpson." And so it had been decreed. Brian Simpson had become "Donkey" to all and sundry from that day forth.

"That's not very nice at all, is it," Holyrod sniffed. "You know, they weren't very nice to me either in rookies. They gave me a very inappropriate nickname there too and I can't stand it! I really don't know how you can put up with being called Donkey. I'll call you Brian if you like."

"No, every other bugger will call me Donkey so you might as well too. I don't mind it really, it's sort of the name I use for my Army self. I sometimes think that while Donkey may be in the bloody Army, my other self, Brian, is out of this shitty Army bullshit, somewhere else. Another me. It keeps me sane. By the way, what did they nickname you?"

"Well, I don't want to repeat it, I hate it so much, but as we're going to be room mates I suppose I could tell you. But you must promise not to tell anyone else! Please!"

"All right, if you feel so strongly about it."

"It's because I trust Scripture that they gave it to me. I believe that God is

our Savior, that in Him all things are right, that He is the answer to all our prayers. I strongly believe in Jesus, His power, His strength . . ."

"Don't tell me they call you the Savior," interrupted Donkey.

"No," sniffed Holyrod, "the Padre. But please! Keep it to yourself. You must promise me! I'd hate the other chaps here to find out. Copping it in rookies was bad enough."

"Yeah right, I see what you mean. Okay, I promise." Suddenly the duty sergeant, Sam Smiley, marched through the door. Sam's day job was greasing trucks, not nurse-maiding ORs, but it was his extra-curricula night duty that Sam held very dear to his heart: the dogged pursuit of Noggie nookie. The occasional night's duty at the Other Ranks BEQ, making sure the riff-raff didn't get out and get his share of native nookie, interfered and he resented it fiercely. “Come on youse blokes, the bus will be here in a tick," he snarled. He turned to Donkey, eyebrows suddenly lifting. "New, eh? Yeah, I suppose ya haveta be, if you're in with the Padre. Hope you're showin' the new bloke the ropes, Padre," he threw over his shoulder as he continued on his round-up.

“Don’t call me *that!* I *forbid* it!” Holyrod whined after him, stamping a foot in childish exasperation. But the sergeant had gone.

The first of the two regular morning buses squealed to a halt outside the Canberra at about 0730. They transported the workers from the hotel to the Free World Building each morning and back again after work of an evening. The buses were ancient, their grey paintwork mottled and peeling. Steel mesh covered all windows. The only freshness about them were the bright red kangaroos — or big red rats as the Vietnamese called them — stencilled on their sides.

In single file about forty-odd Australian soldiers ambled from the hotel and clambered aboard. As he was shoved from behind on to the bus, Donkey could hear the driver, hunched over his steering wheel, head turned crookedly to watch his passengers, reciting an old dirty ditty.

"Here I sit,
Broken hearted.
Paid me penny,
And only farted."

Then he shouted. "But I'll bet all you girls had plenty of time for a good shit this morning! Car-mon youse bastards, get the lead out! I'm a sittin' duck here while you sheilas ponce aboard! Don't want a rocket up me arse!"

"Do yer good," Donkey heard someone answer. "Shift the shit from yer arse to yer head where it normally lodges."

"Shit fer brains," retorted the driver, whose falsetto voice had earned him the nickname Tiny Tim.

"You said it," the joker snapped back.

Those who heard the exchange chortled, adding their own disparaging remarks towards the driver.

"Piss orf!" he snapped. But none of them heard him mutter: "I'll teach the smart pen pushin' bastards."

While there were some technicians among them, most were pen pushersworking in the headquarters of the Australian Force, Vietnam, where paper was shuffled from section to section, department to department, until, wilting in the heat, sweat-stained and covered with grubby red mud or dusty finger marks depending on the season, it was parcelled up and filed away for more of the same at some unknown future date.

The driver slammed the door shut, crunched the bus into first gear and kangaroo hopped back out into the traffic. So that's what the red kangaroo signifies, Donkey thought. The bus wallowed through the heavy traffic like an elephant, trumpeting danger from its over-revved engine. The drivers had found that to make any impression on Saigon traffic a horn was useless — everyone leaned on their own continuously and nobody ever took any notice. The trick was to keep your vehicle in as low a gear as possible so the thrashing noise of the engine could snap and snarl at the thousands of motorbikes, scooters and sundry other vehicles jamming every street. Most of the time they'd get out of the way at the last second with only inches to spare.

The bus weaved from street to street, the stench of rotting refuse filling Donkey's nostrils. Once again, he couldn't believe the filth, the dilapidation, the degradation he saw through the meshed window.

The bus turned another corner and suddenly a shout went up from the front of the bus, "Oh no! Not the Fish Market!"

Donkey hadn't been smart enough, being a new boy, to get up near the head of the queue at the hotel waiting for the bus so he'd missed a seat and was strap hanging. He turned to see that the wail of anguish had come from the bloke who had taunted the driver when they were boarding.

"God no Tiny, that little crack of mine didn't deserve the Fish Market!" he wailed.

Cries of dread filled the bus, offers of free cans of beer flowed over Tiny

Tim. He ignored every plea, every offer, crashing his gears, swinging his bus this way and that, forever onward, towards the Saigon Fish Market.

"I'll teach you bastards to take the piss out of Tiny Tim!" he shouted above the din, squeaking with laughter. Donkey was completely mystified by the commotion. He turned to the Padre.

"What's going on? Why all the fuss?"

"You'll soon find out. And you'll be sorry!"

Donkey didn't like the sound of that. Every time somebody said that to him trouble followed.

"I'll murder you, Tim, ya bastard!" The pleas and promises had turned to threats. And Tiny Tim just drove on, chuckling. The bus turned another corner — and Donkey almost choked. The Fish Market, now immediately on their left, draped its blanket of fetid, black air over the bus. Handkerchiefs flew to mouths and noses. Those without them choked, coughed and clamped their teeth to prevent their breakfast and last night's beer from making an unwelcome grand re-appearance.

Donkey's grandfather had told him once about the mustard gas in the World War 1 trenches. It couldn't have been half as bad as this, he thought, as his stomach began leaping at his throat.

The market looked as though it had never been cleaned. Broken-down stalls were covered by tattered black plastic sheeting or cloth shades giving the appearance of a shredded tent city. Rotting fish lay everywhere, cooking into a black, putrefying mess beneath the hot sun and plastic. To Donkey's absolute amazement, there seemed to be just as many people buzzing about through this chaos as there were big black flies.

It wasn't only the insult slung at him back at the hotel that had caused Tiny Tim to choose the Fish Market route. The previous evening had been a film night — Frank Sinatra was conned into killing a foreign spy for British Intelligence in a movie called *The Naked Runner*. Tiny was a Sinatra fan but because he had been on guard duty, he’d missed it and was pissed off.

The black drapes which curtained off and darkened the 'theatre' from the bar, dining and kitchen areas created stifling heat so copious amounts of beer were consumed on film nights to counter-act it. As each film came in three or four reels which had to be re-wound and changed on the small projector, there was always ample timeduring changes to nick across to the bar to get

fresh cold cans — at ten cents each. And while a huge proportion of every can drunk was quickly expelled through the pores of the skin, there was always sufficient left in the body to leave one hung over the next morning.

So many on the bus were feeling delicate, a perfect chance for payback. Tiny was delighted with the response the prospect of a Fish Market driveby had elicited. The moans, groans, shouting and yelling had died away to almost nothing now. He grinned. They were all too bloody frightened to open their mouths! He broke into song, his falsetto voice squeaking loudly:

"Come tiptoe,
Through the tulips,
Through the tulips,
Through the tew-ew-lips,
Come tiptoe,
Through the fish-e-eees
With meeeeeeeee!!"

"You're a sadistic bastard, Tiny!" The shout came through clenched teeth from the back of the bus.

"And a dead one too, yer prick!"

Tiny chortled loudly. This was great fun! And as he turned a corner he realised it was going to get even better! The White Mice traffic cops at the intersection ahead had just stopped the traffic flow in which the bus was jammed. They could be stuck for ages directly opposite and down-wind of the market.

He stamped on the brake, pulling the bus to a stop and whooped with delight. His earlier worries about rockets up the backside of his bus had disappeared.

Suddenly Donkey felt a hefty push in his back, knocking him sideways. He looked around to see a white-faced Digger, hands over his mouth, elbowing and pushing a frantic passage towards the front of the bus.

"Open the door Tiny, for Christ's sake! " Tiny heeded the warning and opened the door, squeaking gleefully: "Baaaaaaaaaaaaaark ya bastard!"

Tiny's first victim threw his head out of the bus and heaved the excess load of beer he had slept with so peacefully the previous night. Then it had been cool and comforting, the perfect substitute for a good woman. Now it was warm and most discomforting. A frigid bitch couldn't have been worse. He retched over and over again, heaving every last drop of bile from his tortured stomach.

That performance was too much for a second stomach to bear. It too forced its owner into a headlong rush for the door. Because of the steel mesh over the windows the only place from which to chunder outside the bus was the front steps. To throw up in Tiny's bus meant you cleaned it up. It just wasn't worth that risk to try a window.

"Make way for number two!" shouted Tiny, his own stomach beginning to hurt — with glee. Number one got a mighty shove in the back which propelled him out on to the street. He didn't care. He was still bent double, retching.

"Number three!" came the count from the back of the bus, quickly followed by "Four!" "Five!" "Six!" "Seven!" . . . and muffled cheers through gritted teeth greeted each technicolor yawn.

It was Tiny's finest hour. Twelve blokes, all out on the road, retching uncontrollably. He noted with tremendous pride in his own handiwork that two of them were non-drinkers! Twelve chunderers was his best score by miles. He felt like he'd made a maiden Test century against the Poms at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

He was still chortling happily when his bus threw up its passengers at the Free World building. And he'd changed the words of his song:

Come chunder,
Through the fishies,
At the Saigon,
Fi-ish Mar-ar-ket,
Come chunder,
Through the fisheees,
With mmmmmmeeeeeeee!

Donkey had been in Vietnam less than 24 hours when he strode from the bus to the COMAFV offices on the fifth floor of the Free World building and already it seemed to him the world had tipped upside down. He felt like a baby who had opened its eyes on the wide, wonderful world for the first time. Except that this world was just . . . unbelievable! Why the hell are we fighting for this mess, he thought. But then he realised that now was not the time to go looking for answers to impossible questions. Now was the time to simply keep your eyes open and observe, try to absorb, not reject, to understand . . . now was a time of astonishment, awe, amazement, disgust, confusion – and staying alive.

The general wouldn't be in that morning, he was told by Brigadier

Bradshaw, and as there was no urgent work outstanding he instructed Nickoli to show Donkey around and introduce him to various heads of departments. There was Records, Registry, Intelligence, Operations, Legal, Headquarters Company, Stores, Public Relations, the Pay Office . . .

It was in the latter that he learned he would be earning $89 a fortnight tax free plus a $70 Saigon living allowance. When his Vietnam allowance came through his total pay packet would rise to $179. Donkey was pleased about that. It seemed like a small fortune and well worth the risk of playing warries for twelve months. The Saigon allowance, he learned, was to pay for accommodation at the Canberra (twelve dollars a fortnight, ten of which paid for the maid who cleaned their rooms and did their washing) and meals. His Australian currency was swapped for Vietnamese piastres and American Military Payment Certificates (MPC) which was supposed to stop black market dealings in US dollars. MPC was issued only to Free World Force soldiers for their use among themselves and in American establishments. It was not to be used in dealings with Vietnamese but, of course, it was.

The extra stepping stone that this created between piastres and greenbacks, Nickoli told him, bothered the enterprising Vietnamese and Chinese not one iota. The black money market thrived.

It was during this tour that Donkey realised he had a problem, one that could cause him trouble unless he nipped it in the bud bloody quick.

CHAPTER 3

When he was introduced by Nickoli to the OIC Records, his first port of call, he had been greeted with: "Oh, so you're the donkey" and a big, smirking grin.

"No sir. Not *the* donkey. Just Donkey sir."

And at the next office, Intelligence: "So you're the general's donkey!" Snigger, snigger.

"No sir," he had repeated, his voice cool, calm and quietly emphatic, "I'm nobody's donkey. The general's private secretary, yes. The nickname, sir, is Donkey. Not *the* donkey."

Donkey's icy, flashing green eyes bored into those of Major Horace Swanker, the OIC, making him look away self-consciously. Donkey had found in his early Army service life that although it could be difficult for a private to claim equality with anyone of rank, there were ways.

The major stumbled for words. "Yes, well, of course, ah . . . come on then, I'll show you around our section. Well no, actually I can't do that. Top secret, and all that sort of thing. Ha ha. Ar-umm, ohh, have you met Jilly? No? This is Jilly, actually that's not her real name but we call her Jilly. "

She was small, even for a Vietnamese, around five feet tall. She wore traditional dress, the silken ao dai, which fell to western style white high-heeled shoes adorning tiny, sun-tanned feet. Her eyes were deep, black pearls. Beautiful teeth, as yet unstained by betel nut, like so many older women, highlighted her smile. Her face was softly smooth, free of the poxy scars of adolescent acne — and often smallpox — which flawed the beauty of so many of her sisters. It was almost a creamy color, lighter and rounder than most, her high and wide cheekbones dominating a small but not flattened nose and small, bright red lip-sticked mouth set above an unusually pointed chin, a Caucasian feature. Her straight, jet-black hair shone gun-metal blue as it cascaded down her spine to her waist. As he shook her delicate hand Donkey felt as though he was holding the claw of a tiny, fragile bird. Her long red nails gently caressing his palm. He had yet to learn the intricacies of Asian beauty but he could sense there was something special about this girl. He tingled with her electricity. She had a strange, compelling aura, soft yet strong. She pricked Donkey's interest, drawing him towards her.

A tiny shiver trickled down his spine.

"Hello," she smiled shyly up at him.

"Hi," Donkey grinned back. He wanted to say more, but his tongue seemed swollen, stuck to the roof of his mouth.

She saved him from his awkwardness. "Welcome to my country."

"Thanks, though I haven't seen much yet."

"Perhaps I show you, one day."

"I'd like that."

"It very sad now," she pouted, then shrugged, quickly smiling again. "Still, some things same same always."

Nickoli cut in, sniffing. "Yeah, like the bloody smell. Carmon, can't stand around here gas bagging all day." He moved off and Donkey followed, reluctantly, but not before he saw a fleeting shadow pass over Jilly's smile as she stared after Nickoli's back.

That pleasant interlude proved to be only a temporary respite from his problem. The "general's donkey" line came out in almost every office. My, how word travels, Donkey thought. And he began to wonder how the previous day's conversation between himself and the general had leaked, like teargas, into every office in the building. He couldn't for an instant imagine the story emanating from the general himself — after all, the joke, if it was a joke, was more on him than on Donkey. And he didn't relish at all being the butt of every gag in the entire Free World building. It wasn't he who was the ass, it was the bloody Army.

As they were approaching the Pay Office, their last call, Donkey turned to Nickoli. "This story about me being *the* donkey. It seems to have got around in double-quick time," he mused.

"It's a small Free World," Nickoli punned. He chortled at his own joke.

"Around here it seems to be a bloody small Free World," Donkey shot back. "I'll tell you what, corporal. I don't mind being called Donkey but what I do mind is some bastard running around spreading twisted stories making me look like an idiot and giving every man and his dog the perfect opportunity to take the piss out of me."

Nickoli baulked as Donkey stopped and faced him, pinning him with blazing eyes. "And I'll tell you something else. If I find out who's got the big mouth I'll shove his teeth so far down his throat he'll be forced to eat lunch through his arse."

"Don't look at me!" Nickoli squeaked. "I don't know how the story got

around!"

Nickoli, though, had gone white. The bloody shit is a liar as well, thought Donkey. "Perhaps you'd care to pass on the message then," he spat into Nickoli's face.

"I don't know anything about it. I'll, ah . . . here's the Pay Office."

You weak bastard, Donkey thought. There was trouble ahead with this prick. He would have to be careful.

The afternoon went quickly. The general had arrived back from his meeting around 3 pm and had kept Donkey busy typing signals to be sent back to Canberra. He was finished before the bus was due at 5.30 and caught it back to the Canberra. He was in the middle of the file meandering into the hotel when a shout rose from the front: "Up the old red rooster!" It was immediately followed by a cry from everyone in the file: "More piss!"

Donkey turned to Nickoli: "What is the world was all that about?"

"It just sort of lets the duty sergeant know we're home and to open the bar, if it's not already open," he said.

Inside the hotel Donkey could see that nobody, in fact, was walking up to the bar. Instead, they were going up the stairs to their rooms.

"No weapons allowed near the bar," Nickoli explained. "They must be put away in your room as soon as you get back from work."

Donkey headed for his own room, leaned his rifle in a corner and flopped down on his bed. He took his glasses off and mopped the sweat from his brow, nose, face and neck. God this place is hot, he thought, looking at his sweat-soaked Army summer uniform.

He changed into shorts, t-shirt and thongs and headed down to the bar. A can of VB disappeared very quickly. Hungry, he queued in the chow line for a plate of steak, eggs and salad. It was quite good.

Nickoli introduced him to half a dozen other blokes, all Nashos apart from himself. They wanted to know, primarily, what Donkey had done in Civvy Street; where he came from; what he was doing here in Saigon.

After two cans Donkey excused himself. Letters to write, he told them. Back in his room, stripped to the waist, with the fan wheezing overhead, he pulled out his burgundy zip-up writing set, a going-away present from his fiancee, Allison, and began to write.

He told her everything that had happened since he had left Sydney; his first impressions of the Vietnamese people ... *although badly in need of a wash, they are reasonably well dressed. Most wear black, silk, loose pants that look*

like pyjamas with a light, white short-sleeved shirt. It seems much more practical than our gear in this weather. Boy, is it HOT! The Asian girls are sensational (only teasing!). They wear similar long pants to the older people except they are white and tighter but I doubt if you would be game to wear what they do. Underwear is bra and panties under these silk pants or trousers with a very light blouse-dress sort of thing which has hooks on both sides from under the arms to the waist where it is then open on both sides to the ankles, or perhaps I should say it's split from the ankles to the waist — it is high necked and quite tight over the bust to the waist — not that you'd have anything to worry about in a wet t-shirt competition, darling. You'd beat 'em hands down! They're all tiny! This is their traditional dress, called an Ao Dai, and depending on the lightness of the materials used, it can be quite disconcerting to us innocent Australian males here!

He smiled to himself. Allison Burke was a 36 plus around the chest. And she was almost as tall as he was, probably five feet nine inches. She would dwarf the Vietnamese women. The only similarity between them was long, straight dark hair, although Allison's wasn't as black as the Vietnamese. And her eyes were green, not dark brown, or black. And she was beautiful. Round eyes, long legs, great body . . . they had become engaged the previous Christmas and believed they loved one another dearly. The next twelve months would be a real test of that.

He wrote on ... *well, that's enough about the Vietnamese women, a few of whom are pretty, but I've probably said more than what's good for me now. Don't worry, I'm behaving myself. There's very little opportunity not to.*

He told here about the Vietnamese maids "who do our washing, ironing and room cleaning for ten dollars a fortnight. It's peanuts to us but a small fortune to them."

He wrote about his pay, the Saigon Living Allowance, "five dollars US a day. Everybody saves their pay. They never touch their paybook except when they're going on R & R. They all live off the Saigon allowance and still manage to save some of that too."

Donkey leaned back in the chair and stretched, relaxing for a moment. Holyrod had his head buried in a book.

"What are you reading?" Donkey asked.

"The Bible," Holyrod replied, keeping his eyes down.

"Eh?" said Donkey. "Bullshit!"

Holyrod showed Donkey the book. It was Gideon's.

"Hmm, you did say you were religious, didn't you. What's the record you're playing. Sounds like a choir or something."

"It is, the Twenty Third Psalm by the Sydney Evangelical Choir."

From the room next door the clanging metal of Jimi Hendrix was battering the wall.

"Sounds good," noted Donkey.

"Yes, they're an excellent choir. You know, it's a very rare recording. I had it sent over from Australia especially. Not many of them around. Mum bought it for me."

"No, I meant the radiogram. Beautiful tone. Where'd you get it?"

"At the PX."

"What's the PX?"

"American supermarket. There's one here in Cholon and another out at Tan Son Nhut. They've got just about everything. It's amazing what you can buy."

"You're having me on."

"No, fair dinkum, they're huge places where Free World Forces can shop. No Vietnamese though. They're heavily guarded to keep them out. I'll take you down there one day and show you around."

"Yeah, I'd like that. I'm dying to have a look around Saigon. What I've seen so far absolutely fascinates me. It's an amazing place, isn't it."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet."

"I suppose you're right."

"Have you nearly finished your letter?"

"Yeah, just about. Why?"

"I'd like to go to bed, you know, turn out the light."

"Sure. I'll just finish it off and hit the fuckin' fart-sack myself, I think. I'm buggered."

"I wish you wouldn't speak like that."

"Eh? Like what?"

"Swearing."

"Swearing? I didn't swear."

"Yes you did."

"What'd I say?"

"I don't really wish to repeat it. It's not very nice. It offends me."

"Well for Christ's sake, if you won't tell me what I said, how can I know what offends you?"

"And don't take the Lord's name in vain please."

Donkey was flabbergasted. "For cryin' out loud, I think I'll just finish my letter!" He turned back to the table and picked up his pen ... *I've got to sign off now darling, my room mate wants to go to bed. He's a strange sort of bloke 'though all right I suppose. He's got religious books and records galore which he plays on this magnificent radiogram he bought over here. It's got twin speakers about three feet high by fifteen inches wide and they sound fantastic. I don't know what religion he is but he doesn't kick with the right foot. He's fair haired (crew cut) and tells me he has to shave only twice a month (lucky bugger).*

" Actually, I'm pretty tired too. Now that I've explained to you in this letter what has happened to me over the past couple of days I'm sure you'll understand! It's already ten pages long and there's so much more I have to tell you but I'm afraid it will have to wait until I write tomorrow.

"You know, I'm missing you terribly already. All my love, Brian."

Donkey folded the pages into a bulky pile and stuffed them into an envelope. He rose wearily from the chair then stopped, startled. Holyrod was kneeling beside his bed, head bowed, hands clasped in prayer. Donkey stared, flabbergasted, at the Soldier of the Lord. Still, he thought to himself, they keep telling us it's a Free World. Good luck to him.

Holyrod was still on his knees twenty minutes later, well after Donkey had switched off the light and got into bed.

The satanic screechings of Hendrix were still exploding charges in the common wall with the room next door.

"Come on, let loose,

Come on tell the truth,

Shame the Devil."

He's singin' your song, Padre, mused Donkey before rolling over. But still unsure of his room mate, Donkey thought he had better sleep like a drover's dog — with one eye open.

CHAPTER 4

Donkey soon developed a nightly routine of dinner washed down with a couple of cans of beer before strolling up to his room to write letters then going to bed. It was the same for almost everyone. Only guard duties or movie nights broke this regimen. A great deal of time was spent writing letters, something of a chore but it was the best way to ensure that you received letters yourself and that was vitally important. News from home, from family, was better than a good feed.

Donkey and Allison had promised they would write to one another every day but he soon found it wasn't only his fiancee who would keep him busy with pen and paper. Her mum and dad wrote occasionally and her two little sisters jotted a note now and again. Then there was Donkey's family: mum, dad, five brothers and sisters. Being the oldest child, he could often see, through their cute, childish words, his mother standing over them, threatening, yet encouraging, in that peculiar way of hers: 'you must write to your brother at the war.'

Occasionally too an aunt would write; one of his grandmothers wrote every week, the other not so often. A few friends wrote, especially two he'd made in his brief journalistic career. All wanted a first person answer to the one question: what's it like?

Donkey always wrote back that war's hell, and then told them that really, things weren't that bad at all. The battle front — if there was such a thing — was a long way from his Saigon hotel. They found that hard to believe; fancy going to war from a hotel every day!

Holyrod had beaten Donkey to the desk and was writing letters of his own. Donkey sat up on his bed, put his back against the wall and rested on his knees a yellow foolscap pad he had pinched from the office. He began writing.

My Dearest Darling, I'm writing this by the light of three candles. The power is off as it often is. It appears as though there is absolutely nothing in this country which you could call dependable.

The general was out for most of the day and I had nothing to do but he returned about four o'clock and loaded me down with work. While he was away though I made my first trip to the American Forces PX (a huge

supermarket). The stuff you can get is amazing. There's no limit and the prices are unbelievably low. I bought a beach-sized towel for $US1.80 ($A1.65), a carton of smokes for $1.10 or ten cents a pack and a three-pound box of soap powder (for my maid to do my washing) and a large thingo of bleach for a dollar. Once I've saved a few dollars I plan to buy a camera, typewriter, transistor and tape recorder so that instead of writing letters all the time we can send tapes to one another.

The letter I got from you today was your reply to my first letter to you from here. It was marvellous to get it so soon. In answer to your queries: I work seven days a week with an occasional day off. Work seems to come in bundles. Like today. I had nothing to do for most of it (hence the trip to the PX) but had to work back until 6.30 after the general came back and loaded me down. I got a lift back to the Canberra with the duty driver.

We are not allowed to go anywhere on our own, catch cabs or wear civilian clothes outside the Canberra. We must always carry a weapon although rifles are a damn nuisance to lug around and we never need them.

I'm sitting on my bed writing this dressed in only my pyjama pants. It's too hot to wear anything else. And I'm smoking an American Marlboro (no Styvesant at the PX much to my surprise and he was the bloke who was supposed to have founded New York!).

I told you about my room mate in a previous letter. I'm not real sure about him yet but he doesn't seem a bad bloke.

We received a bunch of "Dear Soldier" letters today. They're from Australian (usually) girls wanting to write to soldiers over here. Some are absolutely hilarious but the one I read was quite straight forward. I reckon it's great for girls to do this. It must be awfully lonely here for a soldier who hasn't got a girl to write to him, especially the fighting troops.

Before I forget, I must tell you this story. Heaps of Noggie kids (aged around four to eight, I suppose, although they're all so small it's a bit difficult to judge accurately) carry boot polish boxes. Every morning while we're waiting for the bus you can guarantee a dozen of them will pester you to let them clean your shoes or even your rifle ("Numbah Wahn job, Uc Da Loi!" they shout). Uc Da Loi is their name for Australians. Loosely translated, it means "big men from the great southern land". They're great kids but one little bloke got caught this morning. One of our blokes jumped out of the bus, chased him and took his box off him. The kids knew what was coming and ran but when the bloke began writing on the footpath with the nugget and

brush the kid got curious and came back for a look. He was immediately grabbed and had his face nuggeted.

The kid thought it was great but then tried to wash it off in cold water from an old wine bottle they carry to help their polishing. Of course, he made his face worse!

It's amazing how happy and cheerful these kids are despite their poverty — but filthy! You've got no idea how dirty they are, although it's hard to see at first glance because of their brown skin. On close inspection though, the dirt seems to give them their color!

That's about all the news I've got for today, darling. I'm missing you terribly already. Until tomorrow, love Brian.

PS: Could you send over my shorthand books please. I might as well use the time here to have another go at trying to master it. Got a letter from dad, too, today. He said my BHP shares are now worth $18.50. So let's see, fifty shares at $18.50 equals $925! Not a bad buy at eight bucks were they!

As he folded the letter and put it in an envelope, addressed it and wrote FREE where the stamp normally went, a completely foreign thought suddenly sprang into his mind. He hadn't really thought about it, but subconsciously he had felt there was something strange about that Jilly bird being at the Free World and now he realised what it was. Apart from the uniformed office staff, all men, who occupied offices on the ground floor of the Free World building, and the cleaners, Jilly was the only Vietnamese national he had seen working for the Australians.

"Hey Padre, what's with that . . ."

"Don't call me that."

"Sorry. That bird in the Intelligence office. Jilly. What's the story with her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, who is she? What does she do?"

"Oh. She's Major Swanker's interpreter. He has a lot of dealings with Vietnamese, obviously. Why do you ask?"

"That makes sense. I just thought it strange that she’s the only Nog who's working for us."

"Security risks, that's why. How do you tell the good guys from the bad guys over here, they’re all slopes. She's got a pretty high clearance, I believe. Major Swanker seems to think she's A-1."

"What do you mean, he's knocking her off?"

"Good Lord no, of course not, I would never suggest such a thing. She has first class connections in Saigon's power and social circles, that's what I mean! And apparently she's very good at what she does."

"Ohh, I see."

"So the story goes anyway. And that's why she's so valuable to us."

"Well, who *is* knocking her off?"

"There you go again . . ."

"*Some*body must be."

The Padre snorted in disgust. "I'll have no further part in this conversation." He sniffed contemptuously, turned his back, dropped to his knees and bowed his head low over his bed to pray.

Donkey shrugged, unconcerned by the Padre's snub, his thoughts still fixed on his question.

CHAPTER 5

Donkey's first two weeks in Vietnam passed quickly. He had settled down to the job with the general and found it wasn't as difficult as he had first imagined. Big Al was nowhere near as demanding as his gruff manner had suggested. In fact, the job was fairly easy once he had deciphered the general's large, scrawling handwriting. Taking shorthand hadn't proved a problem either. Big Al found he had difficulty dictating because, apparently, he'd never done it before. Donkey kept up with him easily and eventually the general had tired of stumbling over his own words and phrases and went back to writing out what he wanted himself, dumping great piles of work on Donkey's desk just as he was due to go home. That meant staying back to type it up so it would be ready for dispatch to Canberra first thing the next morning either by signal or by diplomatic pouch through the Australian Embassy in Saigon.

Quite often Donkey would not get back to the Canberra before 7.30, missing chow time. However he had found that his position was, indeed, a privileged one. The duty driver would be called out to take him the three miles back to the hotel. The duty cook would either save him a steak or re-open the kitchen to cook him something when he returned.

Another privilege he enjoyed was exemption from guard duty, although shortly after he arrived in Saigon he had been rostered for a night lugging a rifle around the Free World complex. A word to Brigadier Bradshaw had soon cancelled that. The general, ordered the brigadier, needs his secretary on call 24 hours a day. His stocks with Headquarters Company had gone up immeasurably after that. The problem Donkey thought he may have had with his nickname disappeared quickly. He was now Number One boy.

That hadn't gone down too well with Corporal Nickoli who fancied himself in that position, based on rank. For the first week or so, Nickoli had used Donkey as his personal slave. Whenever Donkey had nothing to do, Nickoli would handpass his own work. When there were files to be fetched from Records or Registry, it was Donkey who he ordered off to get them.

Donkey did notice one exception. Whenever the brigadier needed a file urgently, Nickoli would squeak "yes sir! Immediately, sir!" and rush off in pursuit, waving authority like a flag.

It was strange though, thought Donkey, that whenever that happened it usually took Nickoli a long time to locate the urgent file. When he did manage to puff back into the office with it, the brigadier's patience would be wearing very thin.

Donkey was becoming more frustrated with his enforced gofer role as each day wore on but was powerless to do anything about it. The Army "system" was all on Nickoli's side and he knew it. His big break came out of the blue. Once again Nickoli had sent him down to Registry to get a file. He had approached the sergeant in charge, Kevin Schutt, a "lifer" at only twenty six. Eight regulation hours each day behind his desk had already stooped his shoulders a little and a heavy intake of beer each night had produced a trophy-sized paunch. His cheeks were reddening and two heavy jowls hung like saddle-bags from his cheekbones, twisting down the corners of his mouth and giving him the appearance of a soulful bloodhound. It was an image he promoted, believing it lent an air of authority above and beyond that of his three stripes. Nobody mixed it with Kevin Schutt.

"The brigadier wants the file on the village of Baria please sarge," Donkey asked.

"Yeah righto," Schutt barked from his desk, head bent over paperwork, "every bastard wants something. A bloke can't even get his bloody work done. Hang on a minute."

The sergeant continued writing, in no hurry at all to get the file. That of course was Standard Operating Procedure in every Army office. Long ago work had been promulgated officially and in triplicate as a pain in the arse, killing any strange notion one might be afflicted with to give service in the Service. Donkey had experienced it often — and used it himself on the odd occasion — in his brief Army career.

"Bloody hot in here, eh sarge," Donkey commented.

"Stinking."

"Like a goffer sarge? Tell you what. I'll go and get you one while you're diggin' out the file."

Before the sergeant could answer, Donkey had disappeared in search of the can of soft drink, which for some odd reason were called goffers. Five minutes later he brought back a Coke. The sergeant was still at his desk.

"Here you go sarge. Coke all right?"

Sergeant Schutt was somewhat taken aback. In this man's Army favors were at a premium. You looked after Number One. Period. Donkey's gesture

caught him off guard. He wormed his way out from beneath the clinging cobwebs which had roped him to his desk for months and accepted the Coke.

"Thanks Donkey." He took a healthy swig and burped loudly. "Ahhhh! Needed that. Now, which file did you say you wanted?"

"Baria."

"The general want it?"

"No, the brigadier."

"I thought you were the general's secretary?"

"Well yeah, but Corporal Nickoli sent me down. He's too fucking lazy to wipe his own arse."

"That slimy, snivelling bastard. So what's Jackman trying to do now, make you his bum-boy?"

"And he's succeeding too, sarge. Two hooks are better than none, so he keeps reminding me."

"Pulling rank as well, eh? The bastard! We'll have to fix that little prick. We've all had just about enough of Corporal bloody Jackman. We try to make things difficult for him every time he comes here but apparently that's not enough. I'll tell you what. Next time there's a file to be got, make sure Jackman has to come and get it himself. I'll fix the bastard."

"Thanks sarge, thanks a lot, I will if I can. I'd appreciate some help to get Jackman off my back. I must admit, I'm just about at my wit’s end. I'll snot the bastard soon."

"For Christ's sake don't do that or you'll end up in the boob! Leave him to me. Now the Baria file. Let's see."

Sergeant Schutt dug into one of his steel filing cabinets, wrenched out the Baria file and passed it over to Donkey.

"And listen, when you've got some time on your hands come up here and I'll show you how this office works so that in future you can walk straight in and get whatever file you want yourself. It'll save time and work for both of us. I wouldn't do this for any other bastard — they'd only bugger up my filing system and we do like to make sure we stuff around those arse'oles like Jackman who come in here demanding the world as though their shit doesn't stink — but we've got to look after the general, don't we!" He winked.

"Thanks sarge. I'll do that. And I appreciate your help." Now there's a very handy friend to have in a future time of need, Donkey mused as he walked back down the stairs to the COMAFV office.

His chance to shaft Nickoli came around quickly. He was flat out typing a

report for the general when Lieutenant Sproule asked him to get a file that the general needed. Donkey turned to Nickoli who was typing languidly.

"Corporal, would you mind getting that file for me? I've got to finish this report for the general in five minutes and I'm way behind now."

"I'm busy," Nickoli snapped, concentrating on his typewriter. If he didn't look up this minor irritation would go away.

"No you're not, you're writing a letter," Donkey hissed, hoping Lieutenant Sproule would hear.

"You're the general's secretary," Nickoli sniffed, "you get the file! The brigadier might need me. I've got to stay here."

Donkey's intention had been to get the lieutenant's attention and subsequent support to have Nickoli run after the file for him. What he did get, in fact, was even better.

"Corporal Nickoli," said the brigadier quietly, walking from his office, "I'm sure I won't need you for the time it will take you to collect a file. Get it please."

It was an order, even though the brigadier had tacked a polite "please" on the end. Donkey was startled — and delighted. The brigadier knew the difference between a request and an order and it was the first time Donkey had heard him give a direct order. It just wasn't the way he usually dealt — so successfully — with his men.

Nickoli was equally shocked. The brigadier had never spoken to him like that before.

"Yes sir!" he squeaked. He was miffed. He jumped up from his chair and minced out of the office, steaming, his pride reeling.

He stormed into Registry and even before he got to the counter, snapped loudly: "Sergeant Schutt, I want the file on Operation Jerilderie!"

Sergeant Schutt didn't blink. He continued writing at his desk.

"Sergeant Schutt! Didn't you hear me!" insisted Nickoli, "I want the file on Operation Jerilderie!"

Every conversation in the office stopped mid-sentence. Eyes swivelled between Nickoli and Schutt. For fully 20 seconds there was a deathly silence. Spectators sensed a storm was about to break. The swish-swish of the overhead fans became as loud and snappy as a gunship's rotors.

Sergeant Schutt slowly lifted his head, turning to meet Nickoli's angry glare, self-importance pasted all over his pasty face like a field officer's badge of rank.

Schutt untangled himself from his desk and walked slowly across to the counter, placing both hands with studied deliberation out in front of him on the bench top. Satisfied with their placement, he looked up slowly into Nickoli's eyes, bending forward from the waist until his face was less than six inches from the corporal's. This unnerved Nickoli who flicked his eyes away. His eyes darted around the office. All eyes were on him. Involuntarily he took a step back.

"Corporal Nickoli," muttered the sergeant menacingly, "when most people come in here they form a queue, wait their turn, even if nobody else is in the queue, and then, when asked how we can help them, say "good morning, sergeant, how are you this morning sergeant, I wonder if you'd mind, sergeant, getting out such-and-such a file please sergeant, because the brigadier requires it sergeant, and I'd be most appreciative if you could help me sergeant."

"The general," Nickoli sniffed.

"Ohhh, the general wants the file does he, Corporal Nickoli. But aren't you the brigadier's secretary, Corporal Nickoli? Where's Private Simpson? Isn't he the general's secretary, Corporal Nickoli? Don't tell me *you*, corporal, are running errands for a private!"

Nickoli was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. He could hear the sniggers building around the office.

"Well, that makes all the difference, doesn't it corporal. You doing Private Simpson a favor, yes sir! That's very good of you indeed, corporal. Very good indeed. Let's see now, what file was it you wanted, corporal?" The sergeant's treacly sarcasm had welded Nickoli's tongue to the roof of his mouth.

"Op-op-operation Jer-er-er-ilderie," he stammered.

"Operation Jerilderie eh? Okay corporal, we'll see what we can do for you."

Schutt left the counter and went over to the master file.

"Well, corporal, it appears I can't help. That file was signed out to G2 Ops this morning. Afraid you'll have to ask them for it."

Nickoli fled, followed by sniggering. Schutt turned to a filing cabinet, quickly searched through it, took out a file and handed it to Private Ray Lemon, one of his clerks.

"Here Juice, run this down to Donkey Simpson will you mate. We might be able to stuff corporals around but generals are a different matter."

"Juice" Lemon looked at the file. It was stamped "Operation Jerilderie - Top Secret".

"And make sure you don't run into Jackman, for Christ's sake."

"No," the G2 Ops clerk told Nickoli, "we don't have that file. Haven't seen it today at all."

Nickoli went back to Registry.

"That's odd, corporal," said Schutt. "It's been signed out to them." He turned to his deputy, Corporal Ned Tadeusovich. "You haven't seen that file have you Ned?"

"No mate, it's not on my desk. Hang on a tick, I'll check again." With exaggerated concern, he picked up the master file, walked across to Schutt's desk and placed it in front of the sergeant, almost ceremoniously.

Schutt studied it deliberately then slapped himself gently on the ear. "Oh how silly of me, it's G3! They've got it."

Gratefully, Nickoli scampered away again.

A sudden thought occurred to Ned, as he was called, because nobody could pronounce his surname and nobody knew what his real Christian name was. He'd given himself the nickname Ned when he was twelve years old, not long after his parents had emigrated to Australia ("to give the boy a better chance in life") because he fancied himself, in his odd Polish way, as a lovable rogue in the style of the infamous Irish-Australian outlaw Ned Kelly. He loved the Kelly legend of robbing the rich and giving to the poor. And he was always saying he, himself, was the poorest of the poor but had no intention of staying that way. Whenever he was asked about his real Christian name, he'd dismiss the question with a wave of his hand. "You can't pronounce my surname and you wouldn't be able to pronounce that either. I gotta Polisha pa, you see, and a Ukrainian Jewish mamma anda betweena da two a dem, dey give-a me a name froma da olda country," he'd mimic. He turned to Schutt. "Hey sarge, if we do this right, we could have that bastard running around this building for the rest of the afternoon!"

"Great idea! Hey Jonesy, Wombat, run around to every other office in the building and fill 'em in, will you. Jackman's gunna learn something today, if he's not too bloody thick."

Nickoli found that G3 didn't have the file either. He trotted back to Registry.

"Well, it's signed out to them corporal. Definitely," declared Schutt. "I know what's probably happened. They've passed it on to someone else

without going through the proper procedure and bringing it back here first to go through the Master Register. And they're not going to dob themselves in, are they? It's naughty doing things like that and you could get into trouble for doing so, couldn't you, corporal?"

"Yes, sergeant," Nickoli puffed.

"I suggest Intelligence. Yep, I reckon that's where they would have passed it. Thick as thieves, those two sections. Try Intelligence, corporal. After that, lad, I'm afraid you'll just have to use your own."

"Own what sergeant?"

"Intelligence corporal."

"Oh. Yes sergeant. I'll try Intelligence then." Nickoli dragged himself off again.

"You've got Buckley's, Jackman," Schutt muttered after him. "You gotta have it before you can use it."

Meanwhile, "Juice" Lemon was handing over the Operation Jerilderie file to a surprised Donkey Simpson.

"Thanks Juice, but . . ."

Lemon silenced him, pursing his lips. There were too many big officer ears in close proximity. Donkey twigged that something was up. He'd finished the report the general had given him to type and took that and the file in to Big Al, by-passing Lieutenant Sproule.

"Yes," the wised-up Intelligence clerk told Nickoli, "we had that file earlier on today. I think I passed it on to Headquarters Company."

Nickoli trudged down five flights of stairs to Headquarters Company. They had passed it to Legal. Up five flights to Legal. They'd passed it to Transport. Down five flights and across 100 yards of red dust in the stinking, sticky heat to the Transport compound. The sun was fierce and Nickoli's already sweat-stained shirt now became soaked. Transport had passed it on to Records. Back to the main building. Four flights of stairs.

Records continued Nickoli's merry-go-round. And each time he trudged past Registry a burst of sniggering would follow him.

"If he doesn't stop going round and round in ever decreasing circles he's going to disappear up his own arse," Schutt commented to a raucous response as Nickoli plodded past for the tenth time.

Back in the COMAFV office Brigadier Bradshaw had been dropping letters and signals, one by one, into the corporal's carefully marked "in" basket. After about an hour he noticed the pile had become quite substantial.

"Where's Corporal Nickoli?" he asked Donkey.

"I haven't the faintest idea sir."

"Didn't he go to get a file for the general?"

"Yes sir, he did but the general has had that file for almost an hour now sir. One of the Registry blokes brought it down."

The brigadier was mystified. "This is most unlike John," he said. "I can't work this out at all. Send him in when he gets back, would you Donkey."

Nickoli was still on his wild goose chase. He staggered into Registry, sweat pouring off him. It was 5.15, almost knock-off time. If he didn't hurry he'd miss the bus.

"I can't find it sergeant," he puffed. "I've been all over the building a dozen times, up and down those bloody stairs 20 or 30 times. It's lost."

"What have you lost, corporal? I hope it's not one of my files!"

"Nooo, sergeant, I didn't lose it! I . . ."

"Then what in the world are you talking about lad?"

"Op-op-op-eration Jer-er-er-ilderie. The f-file."

"Ohh, that! Well now that you've explained what you're talking about we'll try to help you corporal. Can't remember every bloody request we get in here each day from one minute to the next, now can we. We get hundreds you know."

"Yes sergeant, but the file is miss . . ."

"I seem to have some recent recollection of that file actually, corporal. Yes! Here it is, right here in the Master Register. It's signed out to COMAFV. Strange, that's your office isn't it corporal?"

"No," Nickoli muttered, his voice rising, "no, no, nooooooo!" He blundered out on to the balcony, tears of frustration and fury joining the rivulets of sweat on his face. He slumped down the stairs, staggered into his own office and crashed heavily into his chair, alerting the brigadier who stood from his desk and walked to his office door.

Hands on hips, he stared down at the pathetic sight that was his secretary.

"Corporal Nickoli," he said formally, "where have you been for the past hour and a half?"

Donkey was tidying up, ready to knock off for the day and valiantly keeping a straight face. He wanted to know the story too.

Nickoli whimpered. "I-I-I-'ve been looking for that file for the general sir!" he managed to blurt.

"The general has had that file for more than an hour, corporal!"

"What sir? For more than an hour! Sir, I've been trudging from office to office looking for that file. I don't understand sir. How could it have been here all along?"

"Excuse me sir," interrupted Donkey gently, "The general says its okay if I leave now so I'll rush off and catch the 5.30 bus."

"That's okay Donkey, off you go then."

"The bus!" Nickoli had forgotten all about it in his confusion. He jumped up, grabbing for his beret.

"Just a minute, corporal," snapped the brigadier. "While you've been out all afternoon quite a pile of correspondence has built up in your 'in' tray. I'd like it done before you leave tonight so it will be ready for posting first thing in the morning."

Nickoli went to jelly, flopping back down in his chair. "Sir" was all he could whimper.

"Private Simpson!" It was the general, steaming out of his office. "oh, gone has he? Well corporal, I'm sure the Chief of Staff won't mind if I borrow you to return this file to Registry before they close." He dropped it on Nickoli's desk and continued out the door, Lieutenant Sproule scampering behind.

"Night corporal," said the general.

"Night corporal," echoed the lieutenant.

"Good night corporal," said the Chief of Staff, grabbing his red-banded cap and taking up the rear.

Nickoli sat dumb-founded. What had happened? How had all this *happened?*He glanced down at the file the general had dumped on his desk.

It was stamped "Operation Jerilderie - Top Secret".

He sat bolt upright. Registry! It'll shut for the day in a minute! He grabbed the file and flew out of the office with the energy born of panic and dashed head-long towards Registry. Sergeant Schutt was just locking the door.

"Sergeant, sergeant!" Nickoli squeaked. "I've got to return this file!"

"What file is that, corporal?" queried the sergeant, deliberately showing his back to Nickoli as he turned the key to lock the office door.

Nickoli saw the key turn and feared the worst. He couldn't speak. He waved the file limply in front of Schutt.

"Ohh, *that* file, corporal. You finally found it then. Good for you! I knew you'd find it eventually, corporal. Try, try and try again, that's always been my motto. Yes sir! Never fails. Goodnight corporal."

"But sarge! The file! I've got to return it!"

"It's *sergeant* to you, corporal," Schutt snarled. "Only mates call me sarge. And as for the file, you can see the office is all locked up, nice and cosy, for the night. That file's your responsibility tonight, corporal. And Standing Orders say all Top Secret files must be locked away in a safe place overnight, don't they corporal," he smirked. "But of course you'd know that, wouldn't you? So you'll find a very safe place for the file, won't you. Goodnight corporal."

Schutt turned on his heel and strode off, leaving Nickoli standing open-mouthed, the file still held out in front of him. It suddenly wilted in the middle, papers fluttering from it on to the balcony. He looked down at the innocent object of his torture — and exploded.

"Bastard! Bastard! Bastard!" he screamed over and over again, jumping up and down on the file and its scattered contents, trying desperately to pound the pieces of paper into the dusty tiling, but he couldn't even get that right.

Exhausted, panting and sweating heavily again, he surveyed his work before realising what he had done and where he was. He quickly looked around, saw he was alone, retrieved the file and its contents and shuffled back to his office.

Donkey met a smirking Sergeant Schutt in the foyer.

"What the hell did you do to the poor bastard?" he asked.

"You could say, Donkey, that the corporal might well remember today for some considerable time," grinned Schutt. "Hey! My bus!" He ran off, leaving Donkey's question unanswered. Donkey called after him.

"Ask Juice!" Schutt yelled back, swinging aboard the sergeants' bus.

Donkey ran for his own bus, jumped aboard and wormed his way down the crowded aisle to where he could see Juice Lemon strap hanging. Donkey wasn't the only one who wanted to know what had happened to Jackman. Half the bus was talking and laughing about 'the day Jackman got his'.

"For God's sake, Juice, what happened?" Donkey demanded.

Juice was constantly interrupted by clerks from other sections who had played their part in keeping the brigadier's clerk on the move. The bus was buzzing with glee at the expense of the Jackman.

“Hey, look at these wankers!” One of the signallers strap-hanging at the back was the first to notice the 'cowboys'. They looked about sixteen years old and were riding a motorcycle erratically, swerving first to the left, then right, looking as though they were trying to pass the cumbersome bus in front of them. They would accelerate up one side and then quickly drop back,

repeating the procedure on the other. Smiling broadly and waving at the Australians, all good, clean, idiotic, adolescent fun. The pillion passenger was wearing a school satchel on a strap across his chest and whenever they got close enough he would wave a graphic porno picture at the bus's occupants and point to the satchel.

Nickoli's fate was quickly forgotten as the boys buzzed backwards and forwards, the Playboy centrefolds the focus of all attention. . Quite suddenly they disappeared from view, riding up the right side of the bus, extremely close. They re-appeared out in front weaving and accelerating dangerously fast up the wide but traffic-choked road.

"Hey, look at this!" It was a voice from a window seat. "They've given us their porno collection!"

Hooked on to the steel mesh grille covering the open windows was the satchel that the pillion passenger had been carrying. It bulged thickly, tantalising and teasing.

Billy Matthews, the Transport corporal, who was built like a rugby front rower, went berserk. *"Get it off! Get it off!"* he screamed, bulldozing his way down the aisle from the front of the bus. He flattened five blokes before he made it to the satchel, flicking out the simple hooks made from wire coat-hangars. The satchel fell to the road.

"Down! Down! Get down!" he screamed. And to Tiny Tim, who was driving: *"Go Tiny, go, go! Get the fuck out of here!"*

Tiny did as he was told without question, leaning heavily on the horn, ripping down a gear and slamming his foot hard on the accelerator. He had half an idea of what was happening anyway.

The satchel exploded, ripping a hole in the road behind them and shattering windows in shops on either side. The bus, seventy yards away, was rocked by the blast and spattered with road debris.

The soldier who had the bomb hooked right next to his ear went white and began shaking. "Christ almighty," he breathed out slowly, "a fucking bomb."

Matthews was laying in his lap, having lost his footing as he lunged for the satchel. He pushed himself up, shaken also. "I've heard about that little trick of Charlie's but I never thought I'd see it," he stammered. "Shit! It would have killed damn near all of us!" He turned back towards Tiny Tim, who was slowing the bus down. "Don't stop now for Christ's sake Tiny! Keep going as hard as you can. Get the fuck out of here!"

All heads in the bus were now screwed around to the rear trying to catch a

glimpse of the mayhem disappearing on the road behind them. There didn't appear to be any bodies on the road. It was Juice Lemon who twigged first. "They knew!" he said, aghast. "The fucking Noggie bastards knew!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Donkey.

"While those bloody cowboys were buggering around us the traffic behind just seemed to stop, to dissolve. It puzzled me subconsciously but I didn't really think about it. But the bastards on the road must have known what those kids were up to. They must have known we were going to be bombed!"

"Maybe that's why the cowboys played around the bus for so long before hooking the bomb on — to warn others on the road to get out of the way . . ." Padre.

"Yeah!" said Ned. "And I noticed that when they went past us the guy on the back was waving his arms at the traffic coming towards us and everything stopped as though it had been shot!"

"And not one of them tried to warn us . . ." Donkey was shocked, amazed. "They just pissed off . . ."

"Hey, we were talking about Jackman before." Juice. "These Noggie pricks have mastered his art. He's just a fucking amateur compared to these bastards."

"They call it Sin Loi — stiff shit, pal," commented Matthews. "There's no such thing as a Noggie hero, believe me," he said turning to Donkey, momentarily before yelling "Hey Charlie!" He wanted the corporal from Intelligence who worked with Major Swanker. "Charlie" was known to be sympathetic towards Vietnamese, spending more time with them than was really necessary in his job, hence his nickname.

"Hey Charlie!" the corporal repeated. "Noggie lover! Explain this one away will you? Now try and tell us that fucking Nogs are a misunderstood race! Tell us they're on our fucking side! Tell us the fucking bastards are worth fighting for!"

All eyes turned on Corporal John Errington, who was staring vacantly out the bus windows. Ten seconds elapsed before he turned his attention to his tormentor. He merely shook his head, sadly. There was no answer. None that made any sense. Everybody knew that anyway.

***

Nickoli stared at the pile of work in his 'in' tray. Just his luck to have to stay back on the one night when he wanted to get to the Canberra early to

watch that movie. What was it? Oh yes, *To Sir With Love*. Very good movie, someone had told him during his runaround that afternoon, about a special relationship between a battalion commander and his aide. Nickoli wondered if it was something like the relationship he had with his brigadier. Well, until this afternoon. Still, if he hurried he still might make it. The movie didn't start until 7.30.

Nickoli flew into his typing, but the harder he tried the more mistakes he made. By the time he'd finished he had typed everything at least twice.

He got back to the Canberra just as they were taking the first reel of the film off the projector. His timing couldn't have been worse. There was a big crowd around the bar buying their cans for the second reel. Most were already well primed. After what had happened in the bus, nobody was staying sober tonight. Nickoli had to walk right past them to take his rifle up to his room and comments began to fly.

"Hey, look! Here's Jackman. Back from our little walkies today, eh Jackman!"

"You know you shouldn't be running around in the heat, Jackman. Bad for your health!"

"Did we get our nice shiny shoes dirty today, eh Jackman?"

"We heard a rumor you actually raised a sweat today Jackman. Is that right?"

"Oohh look! His hair's out of place too!"

Nickoli went beetroot red. "Piss off ya pack of pricks!" he screamed and flew up the stairs two at a time to his room, insults following, crashing into his ears.

Donkey hadn't said a word. Watching Nickoli flee was satisfaction enough, for the time being. Mortification, that's the name of the game. He smiled wryly.

Nickoli had reached the first landing when the cook, who had long since packed up his ladles, called after him.

"Hey, corporal, I saved some tucker for you!"

"And you can shove that bloody shit up your arse!" Nickoli squeaked down, now out of sight around the bend in the stairs.

"Well, that's bloody lovely, that is," said the cook, brushing sweat from his forehead with a greasy forearm. He was a gentle soul, was Will Davis, or "Cookie" as he was usually called, short and squat with a beer barrel belly. Underneath a huge head of black curly hair squatted two long bushy

eyebrows that seemed to be permanently jewelled with moisture. They caught the steam from his pots going up and the sweat from his brow going down and often dripped the mixture into his Chef's Special.

He had an offsider as tall and skinny as he was rotund, Ben Lockley, who was more commonly known as "The Baitlayer" when you were talking about him or "Myxo" when you were talking to him. His cooking was like that.

Nobody dared call Cookie a baitlayer though. He was okay in the kitchen and it didn't pay to offend a good cook when you had one. Of course nobody was too happy when Cookie sang while he was preparing their supper, as he always did. His voice was pleasant enough but his repertoire was restricted to sentimental Welsh ballads and they made him homesick. So there he'd be, bent over his pots of stew, singing away to his heart's discontent, tears rolling down his cheeks into the stew, eyebrows marinating the steaks. Sometimes he'd get so caught up in his ditty that he'd get tongue-tied and spit on the hotplate, just for good measure.

Nobody liked to watch Cookie at his work. They adopted the attitude of what they didn't know couldn't hurt them. And it was better tucker than what the Noggies ate anyway. With The Baitlayer things were entirely different. When he cooked he was watched like a hawk. A surly, thin streak of bacon rind, he was often accused of pissing in the stew. He probably did too, although it wasn't that so much which worried his intended victims, it was his can of 10-80 rabbit poison perched menacingly on a shelf with the tomato sauce which was feared most.

"Any more of that shit," The Baitlayer would warn whenever he was stirred, "and you'll cop a dose of me ten-eighty."

It was always safest to bait The Baitlayer after dinner — if you felt you had to — and then skip breakfast the next morning.

Cookie took a long swig from his can of Foster's, sighed loudly and appreciatively. An enormous basso profundo belch rumbled across his vocal cords and burst over the bar.

"Lovely," he gulped. "But fancy that bugger knocking back his dinner. Spaghetti and meatballs, too, it is. We don't have that every day, either. And all the trouble I went to to keep it hot for him. Ungrateful wretch!"

Up in his room Nickoli finally realised he had been set up, that everybody in the building was laughing at him. Under normal circumstances he'd have had somebody on a charge for taking the piss out of him like this. But how do you charge over 100 blokes? It was impossible! It made him livid with rage.

The more he muttered to himself "I'll get those bastards!" the more he realised how helpless he was.

And now he'd missed the movie! He couldn't possibly go down there now! Not after what had happened! He threw himself on his bed and pounded his fists into his pillow, gradually sobbing himself to sleep.

It had been a big night downstairs. The movie had been good, for a change, and the beer had flowed freely. Cookie and his mates were in fine voice as they staggered past the kitchen on the way to their rooms.

"The time has come,

to close our books . . ."

Donkey saw the perfect opportunity to twist the knife in Jackman's back, to really fix the bastard. "Hey, Cookie, I wonder if the Jackman's hungry?" Donkey pondered.

"Well now," said Cookie, "we couldn't have that, could we. Come on lads, I'll get his supper from the kitchen and take it up to him." Cookie went to the stove.

"Here it is! Still hot too. I must have forgotten to turn off the warmer oven. Come on lads, we'll see if the Jackman appreciates a bit of room service."

The group resumed its unsteady march up the stairs. Donkey pulled away quietly and sidled off to his room — he had to work with the bastard. He didn’t need Nickoli blaming him for whatever was about to happen.

"Room service!" shouted Cookie as he flung open the door to Nickoli's room. Nickoli jumped like a startled rabbit, flipping over from his stomach to his side and raising himself on one elbow. The group swayed and lurched before his sleep-filled eyes.

"Get out!" he squeaked, "leave me alone."

"But corporal," said Cookie, "you haven't had your spaghetti and meatballs. You know, the ones you told me to shove up my arse? Me and the boys thought you might be hungry so just to show there's no hard feelings, here they are!"

With that, Cookie dipped one big hairy paw into the steaming pot and hurled a handful of the mess straight at Nickoli. A meatball hit him square in his open mouth, jamming between his teeth, spaghetti splattering over his face. Nickoli yelped, brushing frantically at the hot spaghetti and trying to dislodge the jammed meatball. Two more handfuls of the mess followed, splattering Nickoli's chest. He jumped from the bed, hopping about the room, squeaking and squealing, trying to shake loose the hot, clinging spaghetti and

sauce.

Cookie's mates doubled up with laughter.

"I'll have you on a charge for this!" Nickoli screamed at the cook.

"What for?" The Baitlayer spluttered between hoots, turning to Cookie, "conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline in that you, Cookie, did assault one Jackman with a dangerous weapon, to wit, a meatball?" He collapsed on the floor, clutching his aching stomach, laughing fit to bust.

"I mean it!" screamed Jackman. "I'm going to get the duty sergeant right now! I'll fix you bastards!"

As Nickoli went to move towards the door, The Baitlayer suddenly snarled. "You take one step out that door, Jackman, and you'll get such a big dose of me ten-eighty you'll go blind — just like the bunnies do — and your balls will drop off as well!"

That nailed Nickoli to the spot. He had a pathological fear of The Baitlayer. And he had seen, back home, around the Army base at Holsworthy, New South Wales (his previous posting), what 10-80 poison had done to rabbits.

No, he did not want to be The Baitlayer's bunny. No, he did not want to go blind. And no, no no! he didn't want to watch his privates slowly shrivel away to nothing. Not that he'd ever used them for their intended purpose, but you never did know, so they said, when the opportunity might present itself. He might even catch his maid one day, he thought. She was gorgeous. He often had dreams of what it would be like with her. Marvellous!

The Baitlayer stole Nickoli's thoughts. "No more screwin' that ugly harlot of a maid you've got then, boyo!"

He can even read my mind! Nickoli screamed to himself. He was beaten again and he knew it. "Get out!" he ranted, tears welling in his eyes. "Get out!"

"Just goin', Jackman, just goin'. Good to see we understand one another," said The Baitlayer.

"Thanks for your invitation to supper," said Cookie. "Really enjoyed that, I did."

"Pleasant wet dreams, Jackman!" The Baitlayer laughed all the way to his room. "What a dickhead!" he spat as he crashed on to his bed.

Next morning, still smarting as he had his shower, Nickoli had a brainwave. He skipped breakfast and made sure he was the first in line for the bus. He dashed aboard when it pulled up and sat directly behind the driver,

Tiny Tim.

"Hey Tiny," he whispered conspiratorially, "there's ten bucks in it if you go via the Fish Market."

Tiny glanced around slowly. "Yeah? Why?"

"Don't ask why, just do it."

"Show us the color of your money."

Nickoli handed over a $10 MPC note. Tiny merely nodded, accepting the note before pulling out from the kerb. Renewing his running battle with the traffic, he made an announcement: "Ladeeezzzzz an' arse'oles!" he squeaked loudly. "This is your captain speaking! Welcome aboard. This morning we will be travelling at zero thousand feet from Canberra to the Free World . . ."

Bronx cheers greeted this.

". . . through a thick fog of even thicker Noggies. In order to make your trip more enjoyable, I have been requested by a paying passenger to take in one of Saigon's most famous landmarks . . ."

"The fish market! The bastard's going via the fucking fish market!" hissed Ned, way ahead of Tiny.

". . . the fish market!" Even as the howls of protest erupted in the bus, Tiny held up and waved his thirty pieces of silver.

"Of course," he shouted above the din, "if the majority of paying passengers wish to go via the Cathedral, then I'm sure our friend will realise the majority rule must apply."

"Bloody Jackman!" hissed Donkey, staring at Tiny's fluttering ten dollar note.

"Whiparound!" he yelled, diving into his own pocket and extracting fifty cents. There was no argument from anybody, almost all of whom had raging hangovers and indelicate stomachs from the previous evening's piss-up.

Donkey collected the ransom and counted it. "Twenty bucks, Tiny! It's the Cathedral."

"Better make it twenty one!"

"Oh come on! Give us a break! Everybody's chipped in! What more do you want?"

Tiny half-turned his head towards Jackman. "I didn't see you hit your skyrocket Nickoli."

"No! I . . ." Nickoli bit his lip.

"Come on Nickoli," said Donkey, "give us an Oxford . . . unless of course it was you who slipped the ten to Tiny and put us through all this! Was it?"

"No, no, I . . ." Nickoli gave up and added a dollar to the pile in Donkey's hand.

Nickoli watched in horror as Tiny Tim pocketed his ten dollars and the twenty one collected in the bus. It totalled almost half a week's wages! They've done it to me again, he moaned to himself. I've paid eleven bucks and the most anyone else forked out was fifty cents!

Nickoli was first to the door of the bus when it pulled up at the Free World building. He just wanted to flee into the cosy, familiar, friendly office, wrapped in its comfy, regimented walls, where the rules were etched in military precision. No greys. He would be safe there, working with his brigadier.

As he levered the concertina doors open, Tiny caught Nickoli's eye.

"Have a nice day, corporal," he smirked.

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Later that morning, when Donkey returned a file to the Intelligence office, only Jilly was there. The major and Charlie, she said, were out at a meeting and wouldn't be back until after lunch.

Donkey didn't mind one bit. It gave him a chance to talk to this woman who intrigued him but he didn't quite know where to start. For the second time, she saved him from his own embarrassment.

"Charlie tell me about what happen last night," she said.

"Going home, on the bus?"

"Yes. I am so sorry. Very bad. Mebbe you all killed!"

"If Matthews hadn't been such a quick thinker we probably would have been."

"VC! Very bad!"

"They were just boys."

"Ahh, mebbe look just like boys to you, but VC. Very well trained. How you call . . . cowboy? Yes? All over Saigon. Hit and run. Kill many people, no care. Cowards!" She spat the word.

"I must say, Jilly, I find the whole situation difficult to understand. I've only been here a couple of weeks but I'm beginning to wonder. You know, the blokes who have been here a long time, six months or more, maybe even less sometimes, hate the Vietnamese. I mean, really *hate* them. Billy Matthews yesterday, when he spoke to Charlie, you could see, *feel*, the hatred. And I wonder if you can blame him when the people we're fighting

for hang a bomb on our bus!"

"They VC, not ordinary people! Vietnam people no do that!" She was emphatic, her cheeks coloring. For the first time, Donkey noticed she had a small brown mole, more like a freckle, on the cheekbone under her right eye.

"I don't think Billy Matthews can tell the difference."

"Ahh, Vietnam very sad place, very . . . how you say, confused? Yes. Some people say go VC, some say no, Vietnam must stay Christian, Buddhist, no Ho Chi Minh, no rule from the north."

"It sure is a hell of a mess. How did you get involved?"

"Long, long story. I tell you some day, you like?"

She had caught Donkey off guard. He flushed. "Well, yes, I would."

She smiled sweetly. "And I like tell you. But not now. Just say now I not Vietnamese, but Chinese" — she saw the surprise register on Donkey's face — "oh yes, lots of Chinese in Vietnam. And I speak many languages so . . ." she swept her right arm around the room, "here I am."

"Ohh, I see. I'm sorry, I didn't realise. But how did . . ."

She put her hand on his arm, gently, lightly. It felt like a cool breeze in the heat of the day, tingling his skin. "Long, long story," she repeated, murmuring, looking up into his eyes. "I tell you one day. Soon."

Donkey was shaken. "Okay", was all he could think to mumble as he turned and walked out of the office.

Christ, he thought as he sat down at his own desk, suddenly realising that he had a hard-on, that's the sexiest thing I've ever come across in my life! He couldn't wait until he saw her again.

CHAPTER 6

It was Sunday morning and after just a couple of hours work, Big Al decided he'd had enough for one week. He took the afternoon off and told his secretary to do likewise.

Donkey made it back to the Canberra for a rare Sunday lunch of roast beef, spuds, peas, carrots, gravy and a quart of San Franciscan milk which tasted like liquid plastic. He took it all up to his room and ate there as he read his mail, five letters from Allison and three from his family.

It had been a fortnight since his mother had written and although her news was mundane family snippets, it still made him misty-eyed. He spent the afternoon at the desk writing replies. Allison had asked him to come home on his R&R leave. No, he replied, "if I did that I'd never come back here and then they'd throw me in the jug." She was concerned about setting a date for their wedding. That, he said, was impossible at this stage. He told her a little more about his job.

I thought I might have got corporal's stripes but no such luck. I think they did the dirty on me. I replaced a sergeant. Just before I got here the job was changed from Sergeant Clerk General Purpose to Private Clerk Shorthand Typist. Why I think they changed it was because they knew I was coming, a baggy-arse Nasho with these fantastic secretarial skills, and didn't want to pay me a sergeant's wage so that's that and there's nothing I can do about it.

He told her about his maid "who is about 17 or 18, about five foot three, with jet-black straight hair in two long pigtails halfway down her back. She has lovely small brown eyes and a beautiful olive complexion. But I won't bother you with details. In short, she's beautiful!" He smiled to himself. She'll be mad as hell after reading that! He loved to tease her. "In fact my darling, the truth is that the maid is about thirty, has a worse than ordinary face, can't speak a word of English if she can speak at all and is rather unattractive."

Suddenly there was a roar outside. He rushed out to look and found it was only rain but he had never seen anything like this. He couldn't see a yard beyond the hotel balcony. The monsoon season had begun. He turned back to his room, slightly twisting his crook right ankle. I wonder what the hell is wrong with it, he thought to himself as he hobbled back to his letter writing, grimacing in pain. He had seen the doctor about it the previous day and got

an appointment to have it x-rayed at 1 Aust. Field Hospital at Vung Tau, the big Australian supply base fifty miles south-east on the South China Sea. He was looking forward to that. The blokes based there surfed every day, he had been told.

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"Morning chaps!" The general was beaming as he strode into the office followed by Lieutenant Sproule and a stranger, a young spit-polished captain. "This is Captain Ron Brown, my new Aide." He turned to Lieutenant Sproule. "Introduce him around please Peter," he said before continuing his march into his office. Sproule did so.

"New Aide?" queried Donkey, turning back to Sproule. "What's happening to you?"

"Going home," Sproule grinned.

"But you've only been here, what, about eight months?"

"Ah yes, but I'm going back to join SAS."

Donkey was stunned. "SAS? But you're a Nasho! You wouldn't have time to be of any use in SAS, I mean by the time they train you and everything your time will be up . . . unless . . . God! You haven't!"

"Signed on?" Sproule laughed. "Yep, for another six years. I go home for three months SAS training and then come straight back here."

"But you're a Nasho! You're supposed to have brains! And six years! That makes you a lifer! *And* the SAS! You've gone troppo." Donkey shook his head sadly.

"And what, may I ask Private Simpson, is wrong with being a lifer?" It was Captain Brown. Donkey looked back at him. He was about Donkey's height and build, five feet ten, maybe a bit heavier, at around thirteen stone. Donkey's gaze fixed on a deeply cleft chin and then flicked up to bulging, light brown eyes. Brown was smiling through gapped teeth, like Ernest Borgnine's. He looked as though he'd be all right, Donkey decided.

"Sir, as far as a Nasho is concerned there's nothing *right* with being a lifer. If you start off that way, however, that's your problem. But if you start out a Nasho like Lieutenant Sproule here and *then* become a lifer, after you know what the Army's really like, well . . . it's simply beyond comprehension, that's all sir."

Brown laughed. "You sound just like the blokes in my platoon . . . well, the platoon I had."

Lieutenant Sproule could see the puzzled looks from Donkey and Nickoli.

"The captain was with the Battalion at Nui Dat until he got wounded. They patched him up and here he is."

"War's hell," sniffed the captain.

Donkey got his drift. "You mean you don't want to be up here, out of the firing line?"

"No way! I'd rather be back with my blokes out in the boonies."

Donkey noticed the crossed rifles badge of an infantryman on his cap. "You won't see much action up here, sir. Although, come to think of it, someone might try to hang a bomb on the general's car if you're lucky."

Sproule and Brown grinned. "Come on Ron," said Sproule, "I've had enough of this smartarse Nasho bullshit. I'll show you around."

"Just before you go, sir," said Donkey, "you haven't forgotten that this smartarse wounded Nasho has to go to Vungers tomorrow to get his ankle checked out."

"No, that's okay. I'm sure we'll manage for a day without you. And by the way, Donkey, if they have to operate, tell 'em to start at the neck!" He smirked.

"Lifer! Traitor!" Donkey grinned after him.

It seemed so long ago, Donkey reflected as the RAAF Caribou winged out of Tan Son Nhut airport towards Nui Dat and Vung Tau the next morning. In fact it had been in late February, less than three months ago, that he had 'done' his ankle. It had been during jungle training, at Puckapunyal. He, a clerk, like everyone else, had to learn how to play soldiers. He had been halfway across a rope strung about ten feet off the ground between two trees, with full pack and rifle, when his left hand had slipped. He'd crashed to the ground, landing on his right ankle, twisting it badly, and then fell another ten feet down a steep embankment. The company had moved out that night for a two-day march through rough and mountainous country to set up an ambush. Donkey couldn't walk and stayed behind at base camp with the staff for two and a half days before he was trucked back to Pucka for attention to the ankle.

The doctor prodded, felt around and generally did nothing. Telling Donkey he was okay, he handed him some aspirin to stop the pain and sent him on his way. There was no way Donkey could convince the doc to x-ray either his back — he had fallen on top of his rifle which had been slung across his back and was also painful — or his ankle, which by this stage was purple and black and twice its normal size.

After a few more days' rest the ankle improved enough for him to walk again and even though it was still damn sore, he had begged to be allowed to take part in the last and most arduous test on the course, the 20-mile forced march. He'd missed most of the other physical tests and his fear of being failed on the course and having to go through the whole damned thing again was growing stronger.

Donkey had hobbled along for the first ten miles of the march on sheer guts and determination. Despite jabbing pain in his ankle increasing with every step, he was determined he wasn't going to give up. Then the major stepped in.

"I've been watching you for the past couple of miles, Private Simpson, and I think you've been going through hell with that ankle."

"It's not too good sir, but she'll be jake. I'll make it."

"No, I don't think it will be jake. You'd better give it away."

"I can't do that, sir!" Donkey protested. "They'll fail me on the course! I don't want to have to do it again!"

"That would be preferable than doing permanent damage to that ankle. It is getting worse, isn't it."

"Yes, I suppose so sir, but . . ."

"No buts. I'll organise a jeep to take you back to barracks. And that's an order."

Donkey was devastated. He thought he had blown it.

In fact, they had passed him and it wasn't until he arrived in Saigon that he realised why, for without extenuating circumstances, he certainly should have been failed. It had been the general's demand for a shorthand-typist. Way back even then, in February, he had been ear-marked for that job, crook ankle or not.

As the Caribou bounced over a hill and dived almost vertically towards the Nui Dat red dirt airstrip, he wondered if that was the reason the doctor at Pucka had refused to take x-rays. If something serious had shown up, that would have put a spanner in the works. It still might, he thought.

The Caribou disgorged some soldiers and took on others heading for Vung Tau before turning around and charging straight for the hill it had earlier almost tripped over. The plane seemed to bounce into the air and climb vertically up the hillside before levelling off and heading for Vung Tau, further to the south. No wonder they call this lot Wallaby Airlines, Donkey pondered. They don't fly, they hop!

Donkey arrived at the Vung Tau hospital around 10.30 am only to be told to come back at 1.45 pm to see the doctor. Nothing like being stuffed around by the Army, he sniffed, wandering off to look around the huge stores and equipment base built on the sand dunes of the South China Sea.

During the French occupation of the country Vung Tau had been the Riviera of Vietnam. The beaches were beautiful, with good surf, Donkey noted. He wondered if there were any salmon in those long, rolling waves. Or had they, too, been ravaged by this crazy war? He thought not. There was something about the sea, a permanence, an untouchable, unchangeable quality about the way waves rolled into the beach, one after another, never ending.

Sadly, the dunes had been brutally scarred. Six foot high rolls of barbed wire marched along them for miles, rusting into the sand and seagrass. Donkey sat on the hot sand and watched a single surfboard rider do his thing on the metre-high waves. He wished he'd brought a pair of bathers with him.

The surfer had had enough. He was struggling back through the shallows with the big board tucked under an arm before Donkey recognised him. It was Ned Tadeusovitch.

Ned, who at twenty two was a couple of years older than the average Nasho, was only five foot five tall. He was the only Australian soldier in Saigon who could disappear in a crowd of Vietnamese. It didn't bother him one bit. "If there's any shootin' goin' on youse big bastards are gunna cop the bullets, not little ol' Ned," he was fond of observing.

Ned was blessed with an amazingly expressive, round baby face. He shaved only once a week and that was to remove a few fluffy prickles from his chin. He wore round, horn-rimmed glasses that perpetually slipped down his short, stubby nose. This never bothered Ned like Donkey's glasses annoyed him. Donkey was forever prodding and poking his back up the bridge of his snoz. As soon as he'd do so they'd roller-coaster back down again. The constant sweat from the heat acted like a ball bearing race. It drove Donkey mad.

But not Ned. He had this amazing trick of twitching his beak and his specs would flip back up to where they were supposed to be. And his ball-bearing race didn't seem as well oiled as Donkey's.

He had very fine mousy colored hair which was thinning rapidly. He tried to make up for that with a moustache but it never amounted to anything more than bumfluff. Still, he persisted vainly with it, convinced that one day it

would be a handsome plumage indeed. And when an occasional hair did manage to grow to sufficient length to peep over his top lip, it gave him something to chew. His smile was twisted, cheeky, like that of a rogue child. You couldn't help but like the little bastard, that's the sort of bloke he was.

He ran up the beach to his towel which was quite close to Donkey.

"G'day," said Donkey in surprise. "What the hell are you doing down here?"

"Oh, it's you Donk," puffed Ned as he slipped on his glasses, squinting at Donkey. "I could ask you the same question. Actually, I'm here on business." He grinned broadly.

"Business? What business? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Can't say too much but look around you, what do you see, where are we?"

"At Vungers."

Ned sighed. "Yeah, but look behind you, what's that?

"The Australian base."

"But what sort of base?"

"It's a supply base, of course."

"Right. And what's just up the road? The American supply base, which is fifty times as big as ours. And both are full of supplies. Supplies needed desperately by all and sundry." He picked up his board and smiled. "Come on up to the club, I'll buy you a beer."

"But I don't follow . . ."

"I'll have a quick shower and meet you in the bar."

The Peter Badcoe Club was the Australian R&C Centre built behind the barbed wire but still only a stone's throw from the beach. It had an Hawaiian bar, recreation rooms, pool tables, table tennis tables, a half completed swimming pool out the back, the works. A little bit of home-away-from-home in the middle of a war.

Donkey limped up off the beach, through the rusting barbed wire coils and was soon joined by Ned.

"Now," Ned commanded as he necked his first can of VB, "my turn to ask questions. What are you doin' down here in uniform?"

"I suppose it did look a bit strange, a bloke sitting on the beach in uniform," Donkey pondered. "Actually, I've just come down from Saigon for the day. I had a doctor's appointment at the hospital but they postponed it until this afternoon so I thought I'd have a look around the place. But what about you? You really didn't explain . . ."

"Not here mate," Ned interrupted. He turned to the barman. "Jimmy, meet Donkey. He's down from Saigon for the day."

"First time here Donkey? Thought so. Nice place this, eh! War's hell down here, mate, ha ha! 'Nother beer?" He turned to Ned. "Any VC soaking up the sun and surf?"

"Not this morning, not a soul actually."

"Hmm, unusual. There's normally twenty or so down there. Wonder if they've got something big coming up?"

"What do you mean?"

"Fair dinkum, our Intelligence blokes are fucking dickheads. Yanks are the same. Every time Charlie has something big on the go they cancel all leave. So there's nobody down here on their beach. All our Intelligence blokes would have to do to find out what Charlie's up to is watch the beach. Or even ask me to watch the beach. I told 'em that once too. Told 'em I'd spy for 'em for a few extra quid in me kick. Some bloody dickhead major from Saigon, Wanker, or something his name was. Laughed at me, he did, the fuckin' arse'ole. So as far as I'm concerned they can all get stuffed. I'll just sit here for the rest of the war, pour me beers, go surfin' every mornin' before work, get pissed every night after work, chase a bit of nookie, fire off the odd angry shot — in bed o'course, not out in the boonies, fuck no — and bugger you Jack, I'm all right."

Donkey couldn't believe what he was seeing and hearing. Jimmy was an Australian soldier just like him, a Nasho, but he was fighting a different war. He was dressed in garish, multi-colored board shorts, an outrageously floral Hawaiian short-sleeved shirt, an enormous straw sombrero, and thongs. War? What war? He shook his head, closed his eyes and opened them again. No, it was for real. That's what he was seeing. And what he was hearing left him equally incredulous. "You've lost me. What's this about the VC and their beach?" he asked.

"Ah, I forgot. You're new here," said Jimmy, tugging down on his sombrero conspiratorially. "Right. Now you're probably not gunna believe this but it's true. Beyond our beach is the VC beach. Our beach runs down to the base's side fence. Beyond that is out of bounds for us 'cause that's where Charlie swims. Beyond their beach is the Yanks' beach and then, near the town, is the public beach."

"The VC swim down here?" Jimmy was having a lend of him, Donkey thought.

"Yeah, too right. They need a bit of R&C too, you know. Vung Tau is a sort of war-free zone where everybody can relax and not worry about warries. It's sort of an unwritten agreement between both sides that you don't play silly buggers around Vung Tau."

"And the Yanks are on the other side of the VC?"

"Yeah, their beach fronts their big air and supply base here."

"And the VC are smack-bang in the middle of both of us?"

"Yeah, they probably organised it that way to stop us beating shit out of the Septics. It's a bit of a bugger, actually, because it's far quicker to get into town by walking along the beach than going around by road. But we aren't allowed on the Charlie beach so that buggers that. We have to go the long way. But it's got its good points too, I suppose. We don't bother them and they don't bother us." He turned to Ned. "And there was no-one there eh? I tell ya what, I'll lay ya London to a brick somethin' big's comin up."

By the time he left the club for his doctor's appointment, Donkey was well on the way to insobriety. And he couldn't get over the VC beach.

"This place gets crazier and crazier," he mumbled as he walked, with an occasional lurch, under the blazing sun back to the hospital.

Ned had left the club much earlier, saying he had to see someone and that he'd see Donkey back in Saigon the next day. "And you didn't see me down here today, right?" he muttered as he left.

Forty-five minutes after his designated appointment time Donkey was ushered into a doctor's room.

"Mmmm," the doctor said, looking at the offending ankle even before Donkey had taken off his shoe and sock, "it *is* swollen, isn't it."

Donkey was startled. It didn't seem that bad to him. It gave him trouble only if he knocked or jarred it badly. He had complained about it because it wasn't as good as his left.

"Well, we'll x-ray it and see what the trouble is," the doctor said.

An hour later Donkey was called back into the doctor's office. He was studying the x-rays.

"How long have you been hobbling around on this?" he asked.

"About three months now sir."

"Three months! Didn't you see a doctor when you did this?"

Donkey told him the full story. When he was finished the doctor was open-mouthed.

"He gave you aspirin? He didn't x-ray it at all?"

"No sir."

"I just can't believe this! Private Simpson, you've torn ligaments in this foot and very badly too. It should have been put in plaster immediately for a couple of months! And you've been walking around on it!" He shook his head despairingly. "It's too late now for that. About the only thing you can do now is keep it strapped up for two to three months and hope it heals itself.

"Two or three months!" Donkey gasped.

"Yes, it will be swollen for at least that long. I'll get a nurse to show you how to bandage it properly."

By the time Donkey left the hospital, his ankle twice its swollen size with the bandage, he had missed that afternoon's Wallaby.

"What do I do now?" he asked back at Headquarters Company.

"You'll have to stay overnight in one of the transit huts," advised a war-weary, disinterested sergeant.

He went to one of the transit huts. There was no bedding on the stretchers. He limped back to Headquarters Company.

"Go over to the Q Store and see if you can draw some for the night," snapped the same sergeant.

Why in the fuck didn't you tell me that before, you arsehole, Donkey muttered to himself as he hobbled off.

By the time he found the Q Store it had shut for the day. He trudged back to Headquarters Company. It, too, had closed. Office hours, nine to five, even in the middle of a war. He swore. Nothing like being stuffed around by the Army, he muttered to himself. He went back to the transit hut. There was just a row of stretchers, no showers, no toilets, that he could see anywhere.

"It's too bloody hot for bedding anyway," he consoled himself, flopping on to a stretcher. He was tired and his ankle throbbed. The bellyful of beer and all the walking he'd done that day, much of it through sand, had worn him out. He lay down on the stretcher and was soon asleep.

It seemed like only moments later that Ned was shaking him awake and, in fact, he had been asleep only an hour.

"Shit mate," he said, "you can't sleep in this shit shack. Come with me, we'll get a real bed."

"Jesus," slurred Donkey, "what time is it? What the fuck's going on?"

"I was over at the Badcoe Club and overheard a smart-arse talking about the deadshit Saigon pogo he'd left to rot in the transit hut. I figured it had to be you. Come with me. Didn't you know they had beds at the Badcoe Club?

No, I don't suppose you would. They're not really transit beds anyway but I've fixed it for us with Jimmy."

Donkey didn't argue. He gathered up his things and followed Ned. They had a few more beers at the club before Donkey said he'd had enough. He had to get the ankle bandage off. It was too tight, he said, and he was ready for the fartsack anyway.

They caught the 0700 Wallaby back to Saigon. When they landed they were told they'd have to wait for an hour or so for the American military bus into Saigon. It was going to be another one of those days.

"Not this little vegemite," snapped Ned. "I've got people to see, deals to do. See you tonight Donkey." He headed for the cab rank, pointedly leaving Donkey to fend for himself. Strange little bugger, Donkey thought. I wonder what he's up to?

Slinging his new camera (bought at the PX only a few days before) over his shoulder, Donkey decided to wander around the huge Tan Son Nhut base, the busiest airport in the world. The Boeing 707s of international airways shared the runways with screaming Phantoms, lumbering Starlifters and Hercules, all bearing the military Stars and Stripes insignia. Caribous shot into the air like startled plovers while ancient propeller driven fighters of the South Vietnam Air Force buzzed about noisily, trying desperately to look as though they too were in on the action. Helicopters wop-wop-wopped continually in and out of their small section of the massive base. A squadron of Phantoms sat hunched in roofless concrete bunkers. The Yanks obviously had no fear of air attack here, Donkey thought. He wandered on, taking a picture now and again, around the edge of the airport, sticking close to buildings and huge hangars containing yet more planes. Donkey was fascinated, engrossed.

He wandered up to another hangar, which, unlike the others, had its massive doors shut, almost. There was a three-inch gap between the two. Curious, he peered in.

"Holy Christ!" he whispered to himself. "Missiles!" They were huge,a dull grey-green, and only carelessly covered by khaki tarpaulins. So engrossed was he by this amazing sight that he failed to see the two approaching American MPs.

"Hey! You there! What do you think you're doing!" They marched up to him, Armalites levelled. One grabbed the strap of Donkey's camera and roughly ripped it off his shoulder. The MPs were big, one black, one white,

and both as ugly as sin.

"You been takin' pictures, man?" accused the white MP. He didn't even wait for a reply before springing the camera's back open, pulling the film canister out and stripping the film from it. "No pictures here man. Cain't you read?" He pointed to a sign on the hangar door. Donkey hadn't seen it.

"Who are you man? What you doin' around here, anyways," said the black MP. He looked hard at Donkey, noticing for the first time the "Australia" tabs on Donkey's shoulders. He studied them closely and without looking up, queried: "You Orstraylien, man?"

Donkey found his voice. "Yes. Look, I didn't mean any harm. I just flew in from Vung Tau this morning and had a couple of hours to kill before my bus arrived so I thought I'd have a look around. I didn't know there were any restrictions on this area. I was just walking around, looking at the planes and things."

They didn't buy it. "Man this place is so-o-o-o sensitive, so-o-o-o secure, nobody — but nobody — can jest come on in an' wander aroun'," said the white MP. "Ah think our captain will want to speak with you, man."

Donkey's further protests of innocence fell on deaf ears. They each grabbed one of Donkey's arms and frog-marched him back towards the in-country flights terminal building.

He was pushed through the door into the waiting lounge and directed towards a door on the other side. All eyes swivelled to him. Donkey searched frantically for an Australian uniform among the mass of multi-colored and varied uniforms of American soldiers — and found one. There was a sergeant standing at the main counter, but with his back to him.

"Hey sarge!" Donkey shouted frantically, "help us out will ya!" Hearing the panicked Australian voice, the sergeant turned quickly. His face was vaguely familiar, Donkey thought.

"Hey Donkey, what's going on?"

Before Donkey could reply he was being shoved into the MP captain's office. The sergeant moved fast. The sight of an Australian soldier locked in the grip of two Septic MPs meant trouble, probably big trouble. He strode quickly across and grabbed the door just before it swung shut, barrelling inside only one step behind the MPs. The MP captain looked up, startled.

"Sir!" said the black MP, "we found this soldier wandering . . ."

The sergeant cut him short. "What the hell's going on here? What are you doing with that Australian soldier?"

"Hey man, you can't come bargin' in here like that . . ."

"I'll go bargin' in anywhere if one of my soldiers is in trouble, soldier. And don't call me 'man'!"

"Hold it! Hold it!" barked the captain. "Let's all calm down and find out what this is all about."

The MPs told their story. Donkey told his.

"There you are captain," said the sergeant, "that explains everything. No harm intended and no harm done. Let him go."

"I don't know about that." The captain wasn't too sure about Donkey at all.

"Look," said the sergeant conspiratorially, leaning down over the captain's desk. "I know this guy. He's only been in the country a few days and doesn't know the ropes yet. And do you know who he is?" He leaned back smugly, crossing his arms.

The captain caught the sergeant's tone. He looked up warily. "Go on," he said.

The sergeant leaned back over the desk and spoke through the left corner of his mouth. "He's the personal and private secretary of our Commander-In-Chief. Our Westmoreland."

"A private? C'mon, sergeant . . ."

"National Serviceman. This guy has been hand-picked by the General himself, captain! Now, you can imagine what would happen to you if you gave Westmoreland's private secretary a hard time? Can't you? I don't think you want your ass in a sling now captain, do you?"

That clinched it. No siree, you don't mess with five-star generals.

"Look, you'd better tell this guy to be more careful where he wanders with a camera in future. I would have had my arse in more than a sling if he had turned out to be a spy, or, God help me, a press photographer. Go on, get him out of here!"

Donkey accepted his camera back from the captain. "Sorry, captain," he said, "I'll only point it at pretty girls in Saigon in future. And you can bet your sweet fanny on that!"

The sergeant didn't say a word to Donkey until they were in the long wheelbase Land Rover which he had parked outside the terminal.

"Sorry about that sarge, but I didn't know . . ."

"Don Bassett." The sergeant thrust out his hand. "We met when you did that whirlwind tour of the offices just after you arrived so I don't blame you for not remembering me. I'm in PR."

"I remembered your face but I just couldn't place it. PR, yeah, that was it. Are you a journo?"

"Radio. Worked in Adelaide and Sydney before the marble got me. You're a Nasho too, aren't you?"

"Yep, a journo as well. But not from the big time. I worked on a country bi-weekly. I wanted to get into PR too but, typical bloody Army, they made me a clerk. And I bombed out of accountancy just after I left school. Didn't even get to the first exam! But hang on, I haven't told you why the Yanks were so upset back there."

"I presume they were upset because you were wandering around in an off-limits area."

"Yeah, sure, but I'll tell you why it's no-go. They've got missiles in one of those hangars."

"Missiles! You've got to be joking! What would the Septics want missiles over here for? Are you sure they weren't five hundred pound bombs or rockets?"

"No, but if they were they were mighty big bombs or rockets. No, they were missiles. I really didn't get a close enough look to be absolutely positive because I got caught just as I saw them. But they just seemed too big to be anything other than missiles."

Bassett whistled lowly. "No wonder they got upset with you. I wonder if they're nuclear?" He answered his own question immediately. "No, couldn't be. They're bombing the shitter out of Hanoi now — from Guam. If they wanted to nuke the place it would stand to reason to do so from there, surely. You never know though, you could have stumbled across the greatest story you'll never be able to write." He grinned wryly.

"It doesn't look as though I'll be writing any more stories until I'm out of the Army, period," mused Donkey. "What a bummer. How did you get into PR?"

"Just lucky, I suppose. Working on a metro outfit probably helped."

"Typical. No bastard wants to know anything about a boy from the bush."

"Look, there's a vacancy coming up in PR — it's just writing picture captions but it's a corporal's job, I think. Would you be interested in that?"

"Too bloody right! I'd give my left nut for a shot at that! I wouldn't mind the extra pay either."

"Okay, I'll tell my boss about you and see what happens. But you wouldn't be writing any world scoops like NIXON ORDERS NUKE MISSILES INTO

SAIGON. The Army wouldn't approve of that, no sir!"

"Who cares! I'd be doing what I want to do."

"Not quite! In fact, probably nowhere near it. Most of the stuff we write is mushroom."

"Mushroom?"

"Keep 'em in the dark and feed 'em bullshit."

"Bullshit, Army, maintenance of good order and discipline, for the use of?"

Bassett laughed. "Exactly!"

They grinned as the Land Rover turned into the Free World Building. Donkey felt as though he had found a comrade-in-arms, a mate.

But mate or not, he wasn't going to tell him or anybody what else he had seen in that hangar. Hell, he wasn't even sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him, it was so extraordinary. And yet it seemed so real . . . a soldier in what looked like Australian jungle greens sitting astride one of the missiles — with his back to the door — riding it, kicking and whipping it in a soundless frenzy, like a jockey would approaching the post in the Melbourne Cup. And around his neck was wound a black and white striped woollen scarf, flowing down his back, like a Collingwood Football Club supporter might wear to a match on a winter Saturday back home.

CHAPTER 7

The Padre and Donkey lay on their beds, lost in their own thoughts as they watched the geckos dart about the ceiling chasing mosquitos.

"Get some, baby," Donkey muttered in encouragement to a small lizard in a corner over the door.

"What?" muttered the Padre.

"Never mind. Actually, I was just dreaming about the concert. Ha! That Gerry Gee wasn't bad was he. He never told jokes like that on the telly though!"

"No, thank heavens," the Padre sniffed. He had not been amused. "The other acts were quite good though. Made me feel homesick."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

Earlier that evening a group of Australian singers, a band and the TV children's show ventriloquist Ron Blaskett and his puppet Gerry Gee had put on a show in the Canberra. It had been great while it lasted but had brought Australia too close. The rest of the night would be spent battling a big downer, homesickness.

Donkey's reminiscences were suddenly interrupted by movement in the far corner of the room.

"Hey Padre," he whispered, "we've got company. Look, over in the corner."

Holyrod raised himself slowly on one elbow. "Another mouse! A baby, too. Take it quietly and we'll get him."

Both soldiers lifted themselves slowly from their beds, the Padre picking up a shoe. They crawled into the attack from each flank, cornering the furry enemy. Suddenly Holyrod pounced, the shoe slamming down.

"One mouse, KIA," he triumphed, picking up the crushed two-inch rodent by the tail. "That takes our score to three. I wonder where the nest is?" He was grinning broadly.

"Jesus Padre, you enjoyed that, didn't you!" Donkey accused.

The Padre wiped the grin from his face and sniffed apologetically. "The little blighters have been eating our tucker!"

"You look as though you've got the scent of battle in your nostrils.

Remember Padre, thou shalt not kill," admonished Donkey, wagging his finger accusingly at Holyrod.

"What? A mouse? Car-mon . . . you know, that's the trouble with most of you blokes. You can't put things into perspective . . ."

"Oh for Christ's sake Padre," interrupted Donkey in exasperation, "I was only taking the mickey . . ."

The Padre was not to be put off. The sermon had begun. "No, no, I'm right. They told us at theological college . . ." Holyrod stopped short and gasped. Donkey didn't miss it.

"Theological college? What, were you studying to be a priest or something before you were called up?"

"How did you guess?" whispered the Padre.

Donkey sat up, incredulous. "You were? Well, I'll be buggered."

"Well no, not exactly a priest, a minister. Nobody else knows. You wouldn't tell them, would you?" the Padre begged. "Some people — not you mind you — would make my life a misery if they knew that."

"Mate," Donkey said sympathetically, "it wasn't real hard to guess. But if you want it kept between us, well, okay. No skin off my nose."

"Thanks. I really appreciate that. Now, as I was saying." The Padre went straight back to his sermon. "If you read your Bible, listened to the word of the Lord, you'd understand these things. Now you take what you just said a minute ago: thou shalt not kill . . ."

Donkey listened for ten minutes while the Padre hardly drew breath. He even argued a point or two before deciding the best form of attack would be to retreat to bed. The Padre was still prattling on as Donkey fell asleep.

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"COMAFV Office," Donkey droned lazily into the phone.

"That you Donkey?"

"Yeah, who's . . ."

"Peter here, look I've got some news for you."

"Peter who?"

"Peter Holyrod."

"Oh! Yeah, what's news Padre?"

Donkey could hear the short, sharp sniff of pique over the Free World Headquarters internal phone system. "I really do wish you wouldn't call me that."

"Yeah, sorry bout dat. Out with it Padre."

Holyrod sighed in exasperation. He was never going to win that battle. "Colonel Drake's interested in you."

"Colonel Drake? Who the hell's Colonel Drake?"

"My boss, you idiot! He's going to see what he can do to get you working down here if you're still interested. Apparently you told Don Bassett you were interested in the caption writer's job."

Donkey suddenly sat up straight. His mood brightened immediately. "Fair dinkum? Hey, that would be great. Bloody oath — sorry Padre, I mean, Peter — I'm interested."

"I can't tell you any more, I suppose I shouldn't have told you this much. Anyway, while I'm here: the curfew's been lifted to nine o'clock so how about coming out to dinner with me tonight. I've got some American civilian friends who live here in Saigon and they've asked me over."

Donkey agreed without really thinking about it. The prospect of working in PR still held his attention. He had to find out more and if the price of that was to go out to dinner with the Padre, he'd do it.

They met outside the Free World Compound gates immediately after work and hailed a taxi. The Padre was his usual cheerful, voluble self. "I suppose you saw that signal from Canberra about that Page One story in The Australian?"

"The 'VC Attack Saigon' piece? We've been working on nothing else all day. Big Al was bloody mad, I can tell you. Fair dinkum, where do our papers get such crap? We haven't seen any action here for weeks. It couldn't possibly be from a reporter here. But had that story been written next week, they just might have been right. Have you seen the latest Intelligence reports?"

"Where would I, down in humble PR, get access to that sort of stuff?"

"Yeah, right. The latest report is that the Yanks expect a major NVA and VC offensive on April 27 — that's the day after tomorrow. It's supposed to be a feast day or something, isn't it?"

"Then why have the Yanks extended the non-curfew time out to nine o'clock? It doesn't add up. Anyway, who believes that propaganda the Septics are continually churning out. Their publicity machine is like a sausage factory. And they've never been right yet."

"This time they probably will be. It all adds up. The peace talks are coming up and Hanoi wants to bargain from a position of strength. What would be

better than having Saigon wrapped up?"

"Car-mon, there's no way known they'll take Saigon. They'll be wiped out before they get started!"

"You appear to have forgotten the infamous Tet offensive just a few months back. The bad guys really caught the Yanks with their pants down then."

"Yeah, but there's no way that will happen again."

"Don't bet on it. Charlie's got nothing to lose and everything to gain."

"Charlie will need one helluva lot of firepower. Ah, here we are."

Donkey suffered the next two hours of religious discussion and argument between the Padre and his friends with great perseverance. The American couple were quite nice, obviously idealistically dedicated to protecting GI Joe from the evils of the world. Apparently it never occurred to them that while GI Joe was not wrapped in the protective custody of their small God-fearing recreation centre, he was out in the paddy fields killing people, or pissed as a newt in the neighborhood bars, or fucking himself silly while stoned to the eyeballs.

All the way back to the Canberra and for an hour afterwards the Padre insisted on continuing the sermons. Even when Donkey got into bed and turned his back, the Padre prattled on. Finally Donkey had had enough.

"For fuck's sake, Padre, shut up!"

"Well, if that's how you feel . . ."

"Look, I just want to get some sleep!" All that crap for nothing, thought Donkey. The Padre had known no more about the PR job and had, in fact, simply targeted him as his first convert. He resolved to look for another room to move into before the Padre turned him into a Buddhist monk or something and drove him, screaming for mercy, out on to a Saigon street with a can of two-stroke and a box of matches.

The next day files were shuffling back and forth between Big Al and Major Swanker at a prodigious rate. Clearly, somebody thought something was up.

"What's all the panic about?" Donkey smirked to Charlie Errington during one of his dozen trips to the Intelligence office. "If Uncle Ho gets too cheeky the Yanks will just nuke him."

"If they can get nukes here fast enough."

"Hey mate, that's no problem whatsoever. They've already got 'em here, right here in fact, in Saigon."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Donkey told Errington about the missiles he had seen in the hangar at Tan Son Nhut and the extraordinary security surrounding them. Errington whistled.

"That's the sort of intelligence we don't *want* to know. Are you sure they were nukes?"

"No, but what else could they have been? Why have missiles in the country at all? We don't need missiles here while Tricky Dickie is bombing the shit out of Hanoi with B-52s from Guam, do we?"

"No, you're probably right. I just hope you're not."

"Me too mate, me too. Anyway, I'd better get back." Donkey turned to Jilly who had her back to him at her desk. "Thanks for the coffee, Jilly."

"Any time Donkey," she purred, turning. "You most welcome. Yes, most welcome."

CHAPTER 8

Jimmy the barman at the Peter Badcoe Club had been right. The festering boils surrounding Saigon and its Siamese twin city Cholon were beginning to burst and bleed, one by one. But as quickly as the Americans cauterised one, another would erupt on the other side of town. The biggest NVA and VC offensive of the war was under way.

At every chance they could get, especially lunch-time, the soldiers working at the Free World building would go up on the roof to watch the "warries" on the outskirts of Saigon. Armed with cameras, they would try to "shoot" Phantoms and helicopter gunships as they swooped and loosed their overkill rockets on suspected VC targets. Usually the aircraft were either too high or too far away to get good pictures. But they'd send off their films to the PX which would return their prints a week later and the tourist soldiers would post the pictures home with captions like "see that dot up in the top left hand corner? Well, that's a Phantom firing rockets at the VC." Night-time was best though. Time exposure captured parachute flares swinging lazily down, throwing an eerie light over an already spooked city, fires burning in the background, the tracer trails of rockets and shells from the gunships slashing white and red lines across the prints.

The Yanks slapped a 24-hour curfew on the city and when the targets came as close as three miles to the Free World building, the Allies decided their precious paperwork needed some protection — after all, there was a Buddhist temple next door and they were a pretty odd lot, those monks, robing in orange dresses and incinerating themselves.

And when the Canberra BEQ suddenly got caught in the middle of a prolonged firefight between VC and South Vietnamese units all Australian ORs were bussed very quickly to the Free World building to live and play at being real soldiers, brandishing their rifles heroically in front of the paperwork.

Indeed, only that morning Donkey and his mates had been woken by incoming rocket fire which was uncomfortably close. Donkey had remained in bed, frozen with fear. The more experienced Padre had rolled out, pulling his mattress on top of him. As he went down he noticed Donkey's confused

immobility. He peeked out from beneath his mattress.

"Get down!" he squeaked at Donkey. "On the floor. Pull your mattress over your head!" His head disappeared back into its quilted, horsehair cocoon.

Donkey wondered how much protection a mattress would give from a rocket and reasoned there would be very little. If a rocket was headed for your khyber it would knock the stuffing out of both.

Another horrendous blast convinced him otherwise. It would have to do, there was nothing else. He rolled out of bed bruising his left shoulder on the floor and pulled his mattress after him. Shit, he thought, this is one helluva way to get a cheap housing loan.

It was then that he became aware the hotel was in a state of bedlam. The March of the Blue Arsed Fly was in full swing as blokes rushed hither and thither, agog with the adrenalin of battle, thrusting magazines into rifles and rushing about some more. In the room next to Donkey's, the mad Dutchman, Jansen, was marching to anf fro, stark naked, with his rifle sloped over his shoulder. Blaring from his tape recorder was *'Good Old Collingwood Forever'* with Jansen adding his voice to the chorus: *'They know how to play the game.'*

The duty sergeant, Kevin Schutt, burst through Jansen's door in a mad, bull-like rush, his jowls bouncing.

"Shut that fucking thing off!" he screeched and then stopped in his tracks at the apparition before him.

"For fuck's sake, Jansen, what are you doing?"

Jansen really didn't know because he was quite mad, or wanted everyone to think he was. When they first met him, people would ask: is Jansen a bob short of a quid or what? And they would get the reply that nobody was really quite sure, but he did a very good impersonation of someone who was, so it really didn't matter much one way or the other.

Jansen just shrugged his shoulders. The roar of the rockets, after all, wasn't all that different to the roar from the Social Club stand at Victoria Park on any Saturday in winter.

'They know how to play the game' repeated the tape.

Schutt was shouting again. "Turn that fucking thing off Jansen before the VC learn how to play the fucking game — on our fucking ground! You want a rocket up your arse?"

Jansen switched off the machine. The duty sergeant raced out, trying

valiantly to establish some order from the chaos. Myxo rushed past him with a camera.

"Where the fuck are you going with that?" he yelled, grabbing the happy snapper by the shoulder just in time.

"Up on the roof, sarge! Wow! You ought to see the action! It's great! Rockets flying back and forth. POW! It's great stuff!"

"You go up on that roof with that camera and you'll get the great stuffing knocked out of you, you idiot!" Schutt roared. "Go and get your rifle!"

"Oh yeah, suppose I should."

Thirty seconds later Myxo re-appeared, this time with his bullet shooter in his left hand and his picture shooter in his right. He dashed up on to the roof. The sergeant didn't catch him this time.

Donkey, from beneath his mattress, heard the door of his room slam open. He peeked out to see Schutt standing in the doorframe, feet apart, head bowed.

"Jesus H. fucking Christ," he muttered in exasperation, *"Get the fuck out of here!"*

Donkey leapt from his burrow like a startled rabbit. There was no movement from the Padre's horsehair foxhole.

"He'll be praying, sarge," volunteered Donkey.

The sergeant took two huge strides across the room, grabbed the mattress and flung it aside. The Padre was on his knees in the foetal position, hands clasped together. Donkey had been right.

"Good Christ!" spluttered Schutt. "Padre, I regret having to disturb your prayers at a time such as this, *but there's a fucking war on outside!"*

"That may well be so," said the Padre, miffed, looking up from his Allah-be-praised position, "but there's no need to be profane about it."

The sergeant's face purpled, boozy broken blood vessels standing out on his cheekbones like little red party lights. "Oh, for fuck's sake! Pro-fucking-fane . . ." Lost for further words, Schutt spun around and blundered back out through the door, preferring the insanity of the chaos, flying rockets and small arms fire outside.

Donkey threw on his jungle greens, thinking that if he was going to get into the real war he might just as well dress for the part. The fact that there was no jungle for miles didn't occur to him at all. The real soldiers always wore jungle greens when they went out on a gook shoot. It was simply the done thing. Procedure, Standing Orders, Protocol, all that sort of thing. He

grabbed his rifle and raced upstairs on to the roof. He had been beaten by about eighty others and like the best seats at the opera, every vantage point around the low parapet wall which surrounded the hotel's flat roof had been taken.

Donkey crouched down in the second row and cocked his rifle.

A two-man space suddenly opened in front of him as first Schutt, fearing a round up his own round, threw himself to his left away from what he imagined would be Donkey's line of fire, and Myxo, having the same fears, fell over to his right.

"What the fuck are you doing!" screamed the sergeant. "Put that fucking rifle down!" He looked at Donkey's rifle and threw his left hand up to his already sweating brow. "Oh my God!" he groaned, "haven't you forgotten something soldier?"

Donkey looked down at his rifle. Indeed, the sarge was correct, he had forgotten something. In his rush to get up to the roof, Donkey had neglected to put the magazine on his rifle. It was all cocked, ready to fire, but there was no lead in the pencil.

Donkey grinned sheepishly. "I'll go and get it," he volunteered.

"No you won't!" roared the sergeant. "I'm not having any bloody mad pogos running around behind me with loaded fucking rifles! Sit down!"

Donkey sat, feeling somewhat ludicrous. This wasn't what they'd taught him at the jungle training school at all. But then, he reasoned, he wasn't in the jungle now, was he. I'll bet all the blokes here went to Jungle Training School and all the blokes at Nui Dat went to City Training School, Donkey mused. That would be par for the course for the bloody Army. Send all the blokes that you train to fight in the jungle to Saigon and all the blokes you train to fight in a city into the bush.

Donkey ducked instinctively as another rocket hissed and banged. It slammed into a 13-storey building about 500 yards away to the right of the Canberra, widening an already large hole about 10 storeys up.

"Shit!" said Ned, "have a look at that! Over there! Out in front of us. That big building about a mile away. That's where they are! That's where they're firing from!" He turned to those in the second row behind him. They couldn't see a thing. "Wow! You should see this! You can see everything from here. Five bucks'll get you the best seat in the house!"

"Fuck off Ned you little arse'ole!" was the most common derisive comment which flew back at him from most of the second-rowers.

"Just tryin' to be a mate. You won't get this close to a war again. Or you better hope you don't."

Eyes swivelled to follow Ned's pointed finger. Heavy calibre machine-gun fire sputtered from the building, the occasional tracer round pin-pointing the VC position in the building to their right.

"Thank Christ they're not having a go at us," said Schutt with a sigh of relief, looking around at his troops. Some were still in pyjamas, others in underpants only, half had forgotten their rifles while of those who had them, only about twenty had remembered their magazines as well. Almost everyone had a camera though. Only the mad Dutchman had arrived, finally, fully prepared for battle in jungle greens, webbing belt with pouches, full battle pack, machete, long hunting knives stuck down both boots, a Colt .45 stuck in his belt, slouch hat, battle ribbons on his left breast and a Collingwood scarf draped around his neck. He looked more like John Wayne than John Wayne.

Schutt whimpered in disbelief. He just couldn't believe what his Army was coming to.

"Get the fuck out of here, Dutchy!" he screamed. *"Downstairs! Fuck orffff!"* He was exceedingly grateful the Dutchman hadn't managed to get his hands on any hand grenades.

Donkey turned to see what the sergeant was screeching at and his eyes widened. That scarf! The missile jockey! It had been Jansen, but how . .?

As Jansen backed off under the verbal onslaught, Donkey was distracted by the Padre who had decided the best form of defence was prayer. He rose to his feet, raised his arms and eyes to the heavens and sought the help of the Lord.

"Jesus!" he implored loudly. "Have pity on us poor sinners. I beseech you, protect us from this turmoil . . ." His invocation ended abruptly as Schutt hit him below the knees with a flying tackle, bringing him down on his back with such a thud that it knocked the bejesus right out of him.

"I can't believe you pack of fucking crazies," Schutt shouted, puffing. "Get the fuck out of here! Off this roof. *Now!"*

He untangled himself from the Padre's legs and calmed down a fraction. "Do you stupid arse'oles want to get shot at? We don't want to attract their fire over here. Come on, the lot of you, downstairs."

It was an exceedingly slow advance to the rear. There were pictures to be taken, a battle to be savoured, stored. It had the makings of some great

bullshit yarns back home. Stories to match — even beat — dad and grandad down at the local RSL.

The retreat was performed to the whirrr-click of SLR cameras, all out of step. No-one was ducking for cover now. After all, Charlie wasn't shooting at them but at the building down the street. Then the pinging whine of a ricochet sang around and through the retreat.

"Shit, I'm hit, I'm hit!" screamed Myxo. His face pinched with pain, he stood rooted to the spot, his camera dangling from his neck on its strap, his right hand over his left arm, crimson blood oozing freely between his fingers. He looked down at it, went white and fainted on the spot.

"Shit oh dear!" muttered Schutt. "Quick! Get him out of here!" The Baitlayer was picked up like a poisoned rabbit by four men and half dragged, half carried down the stairs. Everyone else on the roof now wriggled on their bellies towards the safety of the stairs. Bugger this being shot-at caper. That wasn't part of the game at all.

After packing off Myxo in a Land Rover with a four-man guard to an American field hospital in Saigon, Schutt sat in the downstairs lounge, his head in his hands.

How in the name of God, he was thinking, do I explain that I got one of my men shot — officially Wounded In Action — while he was taking fucking pictures for the family album?

***

For the next week, Saigon was under 24-hour curfew. Not a soul stirred on the beleaguered streets unless it wanted to shoot someone. The Vietnamese cleaners and general dogsbodies who worked by day at the Free World Compound had disappeared, including the privileged Jilly. That surprised Major Swanker, initially, before he realised that the curfew would prevent her as well as everyone else from coming to work.

On the second day he had sent an armed patrol around to her flat, in the wealthiest quarter of Saigon, to give her a lift to work. He needed her skills badly in his dealings with the panicking Vietnamese generals and besides, he missed fondling her perfectly round, tight little arse. But the patrol reported back to him that the flat was deserted. Maybe she'd just gone bush with the rest of the city population, he worried, hopefully.

The Canberra clerks banged typewriters and handpassed files by day at a furious pace and played soldiers by night patrolling the compound and

manning sand-bagged machine-gun nests on the roof while Saigon reeled under bombardment from both sides. The Yellow Peril was oozing into town.

In Hanoi, residents were trying to avoid 500-pound bombs falling out of the sky like monsoonal rain; in Paris, Hanoi negotiators accused Henry Kissinger of storing nuclear missiles at Tan Son Nhut air base in Saigon. That made Page One headlines around the western world, particularly in the United States. It was an extremely damaging accusation and gave Ho Chi Minh the perfect reason for his offensive on Saigon.

"We have been forced to attack Saigon to protect all Vietnamese people from the American missiles," his negotiators trumpeted. Kissinger denied the claim. Nobody believed him. In Washington, President Nixon treated the accusation so seriously he went on nationwide TV to defuse it. Nobody believed him either. In Saigon, General Westmoreland refuted any suggestions of nuclear missiles being anywhere near Saigon. Yeah, right! Another round in the propaganda war to Uncle Ho. While his troops were taking a father of a hiding on the ground, his propagandists were landing scoring punch after scoring punch at the negotiating table in Paris. Lies, damned lies and statistics.

When Donkey read about it in *The Stars and Stripes*, the daily paper produced by the American military propaganda machine in Vietnam, his first reaction was to tell himself that he'd been right after all. What he'd seen were nukes. And then he began to wonder. How did Hanoi find that out?

* * *

Donkey was excused compound guard duty at the Free World building because he was rostered to do the same every night at the general's house.

He found it strange that while 200 clerks weren't allowed "home" because of the war raging in and around Saigon, COMAFV, the Big Chief, the most valuable person of all in the Australian Army, went home to his comfy bed every night — and it was only two hundred yards from the choicest target of Saigon's hundreds, the Presidential Palace. Donkey simply put it down to Army logic. Ours is not to reason why. He was beginning to realise that thinking in this man's Army, in this country, was a brain numbing and totally pointless exercise.

Donkey found though that his guard duties weren't too bad, considering. At the end of each working day, at the signal from Captain Brown, Donkey would phone through to the Transport Depot where the general's driver, Sergeant Chris May, would be cooling his heels or cleaning and polishing

Big Al's big, black American Ford limousine, a small Australian flag fluttering on one front fender, a red plate front and back carrying two silver stars, the American insignia for a major-general. Generals must love being shot at, carrying advertising like that, Donkey had thought when he first saw these star plates.

By the time the general had come down from his office to the front foyer his car had been waiting at least ten minutes, the motor running to give the air conditioning time to cool down the interior. Big Al and Captain Brown would clamber into the back seat while Donkey rode shotgun in the front beside Chris May, his rifle jammed vertically between his knees, magazine attached. If anyone was going to shoot at his general, Donkey presumed it was his job to shoot back. From clerk to bodyguard in one simple step. You sure learned to be versatile in the Army although Donkey wasn't all that keen on this on-the-job training when it came down to the gung-ho bit. And how the hell he was going to get the rifle up to his shoulder inside the car didn't bear thinking about.

Despite his apprehension Donkey soon found he enjoyed the ride in the general's car immensely and it was those two-star advertising signs which did it. Vietnamese soldiers, White Mice, Yank soldiers and MPs alike all saluted as soon as they saw those stars drive by. It made Donkey feel like a king, or in the very least, like the king's page.

Big Al's house appeared quite spectacular, not that Donkey saw much of it. He soon learned his quarters — with the other guards — were out the back on the concrete floor of the spacious garage. The mansion had once belonged to someone in Saigon society, French provincial, double storey, marbled floors, kitchen and staff quarters all on about a half-acre block. It had seen better days though. The gardens were overgrown and the house badly needed a coat of paint. The roof leaked too, Captain Brown told him.

Out front was a quaint little guardhouse, just like those outside Buckingham Palace, in which an ARVN soldier stood, twenty-four hours a day, making himself a perfect target for any Charlie sniper who happened to be in the area at any given time. Better you than me Gunga Din, Donkey had thought as the car swung past the saluting guard and up the cracked and broken concrete driveway. Donkey replied with a regal wave.

The house was in a street of similar, formerly luxurious mansions that faced a beautiful park. A guard of honour of huge trees — probably planted more than one hundred years previously — marched down, in perfectly

symmetrical rows, ramrod straight, towards the Presidential Palace some three hundred yards away on the right. This was, indeed, the Toorak of Saigon.

The palace fascinated Donkey. Thecentre of power in South Vietnam didn't appear to be propped up at all — there wasn't an American in sight. It was a massive, imposing building, more like a house of parliament than a palace. It was set in about fifty acres of gardens, Donkey guessed, beautifully grassed and treed. But it, too, had the acne of war on its face. The grounds were surrounded by a six-foot ironwork fence with rolls of concertina barbed wire inside and outside . The main gate, which faced the park and its soldierly trees, was guarded by two massive two-storey blockhouses. Colorful pagodas in each corner of the compound had been turned into fortified, sandbagged guard posts. They had been built originally to ward off evil spirits, Captain Brown had told him, and apart from the odd rocket or two which had been lobbed at the palace during both successful and abortive coups over the years, they had done their job pretty well.

The only sign of American influence within the park was a helicopter squatting near the palace — the presidential escape route — just in case something really did go wrong and the pagodas lost their war against the spirits.

"Right," said Sergeant May to Donkey once the general had been safely ensconced within his mansion, "help me put up the net will you?"

"Net? What net?"

"Badminton net. The general always plays a game of badminton every night after work. He's a bit of a fitness freak."

"Badminton? In this bloody heat? He must be out of his mind!"

"He'll take on the captain first, then me, beat hell out of both of us and then he'll probably want to have a crack at you. Whatever you do, don't beat him — not that I think you will, he's pretty good. It's just that he doesn't like being beaten one little bit."

"That's probably why he made general," sniffed Donkey.

When Big Al strode purposefully out the back door shortly after, Donkey couldn't believe the transformation. He was wearing a white t-shirt, huge baggy Army issue white shorts, white socks and clean, white sandshoes. The color of his spindly, bowed but sinewy legs matched the color of his new uniform perfectly.

He bounced out on to the court, which had been marked out in chalk on the

cracked concrete driveway, and began a beautiful demolition job on Captain Brown, whose passing out parade at Royal Military College, Duntroon, had been at least twenty five years later than the general's own. Big Al placed the shuttlecock deftly, first right, then left, then short, then long. The captain ran and stretched until he melted into a little puddle in a back corner of the court.

"Twenty one - ten," the general crowed, legs apart, hands on hips in his familiar pose. Napoleon and Patton rolled into one couldn't have looked more impressive, Donkey thought.

He mopped an apologetic single bead of perspiration from his brow. "You'll have to work on that backhand Ron," he smiled triumphantly to his aide. "Come on sergeant, your turn."

Chris May suffered a similar fate but he did make the general work harder in his 15-21 defeat.

More importantly, as far as Donkey was concerned, the general was sweating now. Although he was still bouncing around the court like a 20-year-old, Big Al's stamina couldn't last much longer, Donkey suspected. With any luck, the general had now drawn enough blood and he wouldn't have to go into battle.

"Come on then Private Simpson, do you play?" Donkey's heart sank.

"Well, I . . ."

"Right! Let's have you then."

Donkey stripped off his shirt miserably, retaining his jungle green trousers and boots. Never in his wildest dreams had he ever thought to pack his tennis gear for South Vietnam.

It was an absolute massacre. Twenty one to six. Donkey found quickly that his damaged ankle was in no condition for this bouncing, jarring sport. The general was just too bloody good anyway. Donkey hadn't even made him sweat.

"That wasn't much of a game, Private Simpson. Let's have another."

Donkey quickly pleaded ankle soreness and backed out. There was no-one else. Dejected that his bodycount for the evening was only three, and without much of a firefight to boot, the general trudged off the court with threats of renewed battle the next evening.

Donkey collapsed into his own little sweat puddle, mightily pleased with his now throbbing ankle, despite the bandaging and tightly laced calf boots. He determined he'd be hobbling for as long as he was stationed here guarding Big Al's house.

Donkey and Chris May ate dinner outside at a card table. He was miffed at having to pay forty cents for it, but the food was excellent — steak fingers and mushrooms with roast potato and gravy. And served on china plates, too. Donkey wondered how Big Al managed to navigate his way around the icebergs of deep frozen plastic American food served in every Allied mess in the country. Still, he supposed, generals were good at that sort of thing — that's how they became generals in the first place.

As darkness fell, Captain Brown assigned Donkey and the other three Australian guards — who had just arrived by truck — to their respective two-hour shifts. Donkey drew midnight to two and was surprised when woken for his shift. It seemed as though he had only just dropped off — and the guard coming off duty, Errington, had some disturbing news.

"The bloody Noggie guard has pissed off. The sentry box is empty."

"What? Are you sure? He didn't just go for a leak or something?"

"I suppose he could have. But he's not supposed to leave his post. I'll go and have a look to see if he's back while you're getting your boots on."

The guard trudged back down the driveway while Donkey struggled into his boots. He returned quickly.

"Nah, he's pissed off all right."

"Shit! What does that mean?" The two men looked at one another and Saigon by night filled their heads. Helicopter gunships buzzing and blasting, rockets whooshing and carrumping, M16s and Kalashnikovs barking at one another like dogs in the dark, machine guns rattling in long bursts, coughing in short ones. Parachute flares added their eerie, flickering circles of light to the glare from the floodlit palace and its grounds; grotesque shadows lay dormant in the park, sleeping . . . or were they? Glows from fires around the city reddened the bellies of low cloud.

"You'd better wake the captain and tell him," said Donkey. "I don't like the look of this at all. I'll go out front and wait for you."

Donkey started trudging down the driveway and stopped. His rubber-soled boots seemed to be making a hell of a racket. He tiptoed the rest of the way, just like he imagined a real soldier should. He walked across the front lawn to the guard post assigned to the Australians. It wasn't a guard post at all really, just a spot behind shrubs in the front left corner of the yard, a solid six-foot brick wall to his left and a three-foot solid brick fence to his front. Donkey squatted. If he remained still nobody was going to see him from the park across the road — and that, of course, was the whole idea.

Donkey almost jumped clear over the fence when Captain Brown came up behind him.

"Christ, sir! You could have got yourself shot creeping up on a bloke like that!"

"Sorry Donkey, I didn't mean to. I've got my slippers on."

Not only was the captain wearing slippers but his pyjamas and around his waist his webbing belt with holstered pistol. Donkey began to cackle.

"What's so funny?" the captain demanded.

"I was just thinking sir, what they'd say at Duntroon if they could see you now!"

"Ha fucking ha! Where's the bloody Noggie?"

"Dunno sir, must have pissed off."

"They do it all the time, the bastards. Every time there's a bit of a firefight on within a couple of miles of here. Not that I blame them, I suppose. I wouldn't want to be a sitting duck in that bloody dogbox either. He and his mates will be back by morning. Afraid you're on your own for the rest of the night, Donkey. "

That prospect pleased Donkey not at all. "Shit! Can I piss off too sir?"

The captain ignored him, spinning on his slippered feet and slinking away back to the comfort of his warm bed.

Donkey hissed after him: "Well, I thought it was worth a try."

The captain half-turned, shook his head in despair at the soldier who would never make it and continued his walk back to his bed. "Bloody Saigon pogo," he muttered.

Donkey's two hours dragged interminably. The night breeze rustled the trees in the park bringing previously slumbering shadows to life. After an hour there was a Charlie hiding behind every tree. No wonder the bloody Nog buggeredoff, thought Donkey, his senses razor sharp. Every five minutes he'd glance at his watch and curse its snail pace. Every other five minutes the hairs on the back of his neck would stiffen as a shadow in the park stretched or shrank or . . . did anything. He began seeing things that weren't there — and yet they were! He looked down at his rifle. Fuck this for a joke, he said to himself, give me a typewriter any time.

He wondered how he'd cope if he ever had to fire off the odd angry shot, as the real soldiers called it. No, it wouldn't be an angry shot from him; rather, the odd shit-scared shot.

And then he really did see something moving in the shadows, stumbling,

falling down, sort of flitting from shadow to shadow. Donkey froze, adrenalin rushing to sharpen his senses to needle-point. The shadow, one hundred yards away, black in a white night, flickering in the glow of phosphorous flares, stumbled towards his position behind the brick wall. Shit! What am I going to do, Donkey wailed silently. They're coming to get me!

A sound reached him. A wailing, mournful song, rising and falling on the wind. Donkey picked up bits and pieces: *"Good . . . wood . . . ever."* It was coming from the mysterious figure in the park, only eighty yards away now. At that moment a parachute flare burst brightly less than half a mile away, pinning the backlit prowler to his eerie canvas. Donkey saw the scarf just as a renewed burst of discordant song rifled through the trees.

Fuck, it's that crazy bastard Jansen! What the hell's he doing out there? The strains of *Good Old Collingwood Forever* were clearer now as Jansen staggered drunkenly towards the general's house.

He must be pissed, Donkey thought and began to grin. Another parachute flare burst high and began its lazy pendulum's swing back to earth. Jansen was clearly visible now, a trespasser in a forbidden landscape. If I was a Nog Ranger it would be my job to shoot the bastard, Donkey thought, no questions asked. Then he realised Jansen was in big trouble. The guards on the front gate of the Presidential Palace were only three hundred yards away, to his right. If they saw Jansen, that's exactly what they would do. He'd be machine-gunned to pieces.

How could he warn the silly bastard? He couldn't go out into the park himself, he wasn't allowed to leave his post under any circumstances. And he might get himself shot by the palace guards in doing so and he daren't yell out. He was stuck, helpless, holding his breath, waiting for the bark of bullets which would send a mate into a contorted leap, twisting, writhing, screaming . . .

Jansen kept coming. He'd stumble aimlessly perhaps ten steps, then fall, giggling. Muttering brokenly his song of songs. *Come on you stupid bastard, crawl, this way!* Silently Donkey willed him on, closer and closer. And then Jansen saw the guard box. It gave him an objective and he floundered towards it purposefully, now out of the line of sight and fire from the palace, hidden obliquely behind a line of trees. Donkey breathed a sigh of relief. "Jansen!" he whispered loudly.

But the Dutchman, his attention fixed crookedly on the guard box, didn't hear him. He snapped to attention in front of it and saluted briskly. He

pretended to soldier arms, spun smartly to his right and began marching towards Donkey. But he only took four steps before snapping to attention again, turning back towards the box and marching four steps to it and another four beyond. He turned again and marched back, his imaginary rifle still resting on his shoulder.

Donkey couldn't believe what he was seeing. *The bastard's playing the guard at Buckingham Palace! What a fuckin' wierdo*! Suddenly he stopped and began fishing around in his fly. He found what he wanted and began pissing on the guardbox. "Ha!" he chortled triumphantly, "ha, ha, ha." Louder. Too loud. He'd have to shut him up, Donkey realised. He jumped up silently from his spot and crept along the fence, behind the shrubbery toward the leaking Jansen. He stopped opposite him, a tall thick shrub blocking his sight of the Dutchman.

"Jansen you fucking crazy prick!" he hissed angrily.

Jansen froze in mid-stream, jumping back a yard, eyes flashing to the sound in the bush but he could see nothing. He screamed, flung his arms in the air in surrender and then bolted, hands still as high as he could get them, his gun spraying pee like a berserk single-jet garden sprinkler.

"Farrrrrrk, farrrrk, farrrrrrrrrrrk," he wailed as he disappeared down the street away from the palace luckily, the black and white scarf streaming in the breeze behind him, *"don't shoot, don't shoot, don't shoot!"*

Donkey looked after him in astonishment and then realised there was a pounding of boots behind him. The guard, the captain, even the general, had been awakened by the noise and had come to re-inforce him.

"Simpson, what's going on?" barked Captain Brown, ducking down beside him behind the fence, peering intently into the park. The others spread out, low behind the brickwork, working magazines on to rifles, shit-scared the war had come to get them at last.

Donkey wondered what to say. Who would believe what had just happened? "It's okay sir, it was just the Noggie guard. He came back and I had a piece of him so he spat the dummy, jabbered some bullshit at me and then buggered off again down the street."

"Christ, I thought from the noise that we had a firefight."

"Nah, everything's sweet sir, under control. Everybody can go back to bed."

Brown scowled. "That's twice tonight Simpson, that I've had to get out of bed on your shift."

“Forgot your slippies this time too sir,” Donkey grinned slyly. “Are the tootsies a little cold?”

***

Donkey met the general's cook the following evening. Much to his surprise he was a Vietnamese, around 50 years old, Donkey guessed. He'd come out to the garage to get the dinner plates to wash them.

His name was Nguyen, he said (but they all seemed to be called that which was generally translated by Australians into Nigel the Nog) and he had been cooking for Australian generals for three years.

"Uc Da Loi Numbah Wahn," he flashed through gold teeth.

"Yeah well your tucker's Numbah One too, Nguyen," Donkey said.

"Ahh, Sarge May buy good food, no . . . how you say . . . lubbish."

"Sergeant May buys the food?" Donkey turned to his fellow guards for the night. "Doesn't the Baitlayer do the provisioning for us?"

"Yeah," said Errington, who had drawn the general's house again.

"Well I reckon he could use a few of Sarge May's contacts, eh!"

"Bloody oath! If we could get tucker like this . . ." Mouths drooled.

"I think you and I should have a long talk, Nguyen."

"Hokayy! I do dishes, come back."

Nguyen re-appeared about an hour later grinning broadly and clutching a brown paper supermarket bag which he handed to Donkey.

"You like drink?"

"Yeah, thanks Nguyen," said Donkey, expecting to pull cans of Coke from the bag. Instead he retrieved a frosted blue can.

"Bloody hell, have a go at this! Beer!"

"And Foster's at that! You bloody little beauty mate!"

"Hey, thanks Nguyen, where did you get this?"

"Captain Brown, he no miss. Prenty in big fridge. But you hide! I get in big trouble if captain see."

"So will we mate if we get caught drinking while we're supposed to be on guard duty." But they didn't knock back Nguyen's gift.

Donkey was fascinated by the Vietnamese. Nguyen was one of the first he had met in his brief time in Vietnam who could speak adequate English. He had adopted the attitude before coming to Vietnam that if he had to go he might as well enjoy it and learn about the place while he was at it. He could see no point in wasting such a marvellous opportunity to see — as was said at home — how the other half lived. It was, therefore, with some shock that he

had seen, in the past month, how badly American and Australian soldiers treated the Vietnamese. He couldn't understand that, despite the bomb on the bus incident. Nor could he understand the reaction of the Vietnamese to this treatment. They seemed to simply cop it, smile idiotically and go about their business. He had asked Jackman only a week earlier why the Australians treated the Vietnamese, as he had put it, "like so many dollops of dog shit."

"Because that's what they are mate. Just shit."

"It doesn't appear to me as though we've giving them a fair go."

"Fair go! Listen mate, while we're over here fighting for their bloody country, all they're doing is ripping us off as fast as they can."

Donkey was determined now to get the other side of the story. "Hey Nguyen, how long you been a cook?"

"Three year."

"But you said before you've been cooking here for three years."

"Yes, my family all killed by VC. Uc Da Loi look after me, bring me here. I cook."

"What did you do before that?"

"I teach Saigon University. History."

"A professor?"

"Yes, I teach. Before that, Army. I wounded by VC, get out of Army and teach."

"You were in the South Vietnamese Army? That must have been a while ago."

"Yes, maybe twenty year."

"Hey, hang on, the VC haven't been around that long."

"Yes! No, maybe not VC, nother name, same-same. Always fighting, always war."

"Yeah well, I suppose you're right. The French were here before the Yanks, weren't they."

"Flench, Yaponese, Chinee. Always war. Hundreds of years now, always fighting in Vietnam."

"Well don't worry old mate, we'll soon put a stop to that."

"You think so?"

"Of course, don't you?"

"Mebbe."

"Maybe? That's not much of a vote of confidence."

"Ahh. 'Merican here many year now. War still go on. Mebbe better for

Vietnam if go home."

"Go home! Jesus Christ, mate! We're over here to help you people retain your freedom, your independence from the reds in the north, not to mention the Chinese. And you're trying to tell us you'd be better off if we went home and left you to the Commos? Wouldn't you rather be free?"

"Flee? Vietnam never be flee."

"Yeah, but what you've got now would be far better than under the VC."

"I teacher. But university closed. All schools closed. Many, many poor people, no work, no farms, no rice, child-len hungly, many people killed, all the time killed, my family, everybody's family, someone killed. Too much. Mebbe if VC win killing stop. Peace come. You unnerstan'?"

It was a plea. Donkey didn't see it. *No*, he felt like shouting . . . *I don't understand! What the hell are we doing over here if you people don't want our help!* Before he could answer he was distracted by Errington.

"Shit, the captain." Errington shuffled his can under a nearby towel. He needn't have bothered. Brown merely poked his head around the back door and called out to the cook. "Inside Nguyen, the general wants his cocoa."

They backed off into the garage and finished their cans quickly, tossing the empties into the back of the garage. Donkey, frowning, turned to Errington.

"You know mate, I don't understand that."

"Understand what?"

"What Nguyen said. If they don't want to fight, if they don't want us to fight for them, if they want us to go home, then what the hell are we doing here?"

Errington sighed. Here it was again. East versus West and never the twain shall meet. It filled him with sublime sadness. It had been with him ever since he'd been a kid, as long as he could remember. He had often wondered how his Chinese ancestors had coped with it on the Bendigo goldfields. Not so much the blatant racism or derogatory name calling which had been an accepted part of growing up in his community, but the misunderstanding, the lack of effort to try to understand, the bloody-minded ignorance.

It had bothered him, as a lad, until his grandfather, who was very wise to the ways of both worlds, had put him right. The old man had nurtured his grandson's interest in the east, in his roots, and young John, a product of East meets West himself in that his mother had Chinese ancestry and his father English, had taken to Asian studies easily. He became fluent in Cantonese and was studying Mandarin and Asian Studies at university when called up.

Through some extraordinary administrative bungle, a reverse Catch 22, the Army assigned him to a post for which he was highly qualified. It even encouraged him to take on Vietnamese and broaden his studies to include the country and its history. He had excelled at both, although, as he conceded, there was so much more to learn. His understanding of the language got him by and he was improving quickly with Jilly's help.

And not only Jilly. His job in Intelligence as Major Swanker's assistant had enabled him to get into the inner circle of power in South Vietnamese politics and military. Swanker's lack of knowledge of anything Asian, particularly local language, and his transparent attitude of arrogance towards them had driven the country's powerbrokers to ignore him and use the humble Australian corporal to gain access to the Australian military and political commands. He was building an enviable reputation for diplomacy quite beyond his years and military rank.

But it had been fairly innocent, really, just a bit of fun and games, until he was introduced to Tran Thi Dai, or Natasha as she was known, at a sumptuous cocktail party at General Dong's palatial home. She was to change his life.

"You'll find that attitude fairly prevalent throughout the country," he tried to explain to Donkey. "It's difficult to understand, I know, but you must appreciate the position of the people. As Nguyen said, there has been non-stop fighting in Vietnam now for hundreds of years. The people have been worn down, mentally, they need a break from anxiety and that means peace at any cost."

Donkey interrupted him. "I can understand the average Nigel taking that attitude, he wouldn't know any better, but not someone like Nguyen. He's educated, a Christian, he knows what the score is, what would happen if Hanoi took over, surely."

"Quite often it's the educated people who debate strongest, yet very discreetly mind you, against the Americans. They know what sort of corruption, for example, is going on in and around the palace. Take Jilly, for example . . ."

"Anytime, anywhere," grinned Donkey.

Errington ignored the crack. "She is very well educated. And she'll tell you a similar story, despite the fact that she's working for us, for the good guys."

"You know, she intrigues me for some reason, that sheila. What's her story?"

"She was given to us by Major General Trang Van Dong, the Noggie commander of Bien Hoa Province. He's got his headquarters on the ground floor here. She came with his personal recommendation and apart from the usual details, you know, like good, wealthy family, University of Saigon and Sorbonne education, we've had to take her on trust, I suppose you'd say. There's not much else we know about her."

"She's a class act, there's no doubt about that."

"Ah yes," Errington grinned, "Mai Li Chen is one very intriguing lady."

"Is that her real name?"

"Yep. She does a very good impersonation of what we would call the dumb blonde. But you'd be surprised how sharp and street smart she really is. She's been a tremendous help to us, not just as an interpreter and translator, but in general information, some of it, quite surprisingly, of a military nature. Where the hell she gets it from she won't tell us. Just smiles innocently and sort of purrs."

"I've noticed the purrrrr. Tell me this. Do you think she's trustworthy, I mean totally trustworthy?"

"We've never had reason to doubt anything she's done for us, or given us, to this stage, despite the fact that she's more Chinese than Vietnamese, but you probably know that."

Donkey nodded.

"And you know there's no love lost between the two because the Vietnamese resent the fact that the Chinese control commerce in the country and therefore have bigger Swiss bank accounts. But yes, I think we'd say she is. Well, as far as that can go. Who the hell really knows who's on which side in this fucked-out war! Anyway, why would you ask a question like that?"

"Oh, I dunno. It's just that . . ." Donkey hesitated. He wasn't sure that Errington was the right person to raise the subject with. After all, everyone said he was a bloody Noggie lover. But Donkey had been worried about it for the past few days, ever since that story about the nuclear missiles in Saigon had been floated in Paris by Hanoi and so vigorously denied by the US. There was no doubting the enormous political damage it had done the Free World cause. It was threatening to tip the balance of debate at the peace talks. Kissinger was very much on the back foot when really, taking into account the terrible military beating Hanoi had been given in the latest offensive, he should have been playing with a stacked deck. What Donkey was concerned about was the fantastic coincidence! Just a few days after he thought he'd

seen nuclear missiles in a Tan Son Nhut hangar, Hanoi announces his suspicion to the world as fact! Had it somehow been he who had, inadvertently, tipped off Hanoi? And if so, how? The thought frightened him badly.

He had gone over it and over it in his mind. He hadn't told *that* many people about seeing what he thought *might* have been nukes in that hangar and thought no more about it. But now . . .

In fact he was sure that the only people he had mentioned it to were his mates, Errington and Bassett. He hadn't even told the general, or anyone, for that matter, in the general's office.

And then he had remembered the one exception. When he had told Errington — and he remembered it quite clearly — Jilly had been seated at her desk nearby with her back to him and must have heard every word. But now Errington was telling him she was completely trustworthy.

Shit, he decided, if I can't talk to Errington, who the hell can I talk to? Major Swanker? You'd have to be kidding! He explained his dilemma to the interpreter.

"Crikey, I think you're drawing a longbow on that one," Errington drawled. "Look at it this way: if Jilly was a spy and what you are guessing is correct, she'd be putting herself right in, wouldn't see? The finger would point straight back to her. Nobody's that dumb, especially Jilly. Na, forget it. You're talking about one hell of a coincidence, I'll give you that, but that's all."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. It's just that it's such a bloody damaging coincidence."

"Forget about it. And let me give you a tip: keep it to yourself. If Swanker hears about it he'll instigate a royal commission. Come on, it's almost time to start the guard. Let's draw straws for shifts."

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” Donkey acknowledged, drawing the short straw for the 0200 to 0400 shift. “Fucking just my luck!”

It was an extraordinary coincidence indeed, Errington thought as he stretched out on the garage floor. He smiled to himself. And maybe it wouldn’t be all that difficult to find out just how extraordinary, now that he knew Natasha.

She had the hots for him, he was absolutely certain of that. At the cocktail party where he’d first seen her the night before the offensive began just a short week ago she hadn’t been able to keep her eyes off him (although every time he caught her she quickly glanced away demurely) and, he had to admit

to himself cheerfully, he was mightily attracted to her too.

She wore the uniform of a captain in the Vietnamese Special Forces, an elite. She must have been one very special lady, he thought. When General Dong introduced her to him (as his special Aide) she smiled shyly and bobbed her head with exaggerated courtesy despite the fact that she out-ranked him considerably.

“Lovely to meet you Captain,” he said in Vietnamese. She glanced up into his eyes, her own rounding slightly in surprise. They were brown, Errington noticed, flecked with just a touch of gold. Her face was longer than most Vietnamese, her cheekbones less pronounced, nose a little larger and only slightly splayed, mouth wide, so that when she smiled she showed almost all her beautiful teeth. It wasn’t a classic countenance, Errington decided, but that smile, that’s what grabbed you.

She answered him in Vietnamese, quickly turning to Dong. “The corporal speaks our language very well, sir.”

“Not only that captain,” Dong answered, “he understands our people and our history very well. And what he still does not know, he wants to learn. Captain, as well as your responsibilities with the Americans, I am charging you with the responsibility to teach him. Ah, there is General Cassidy. I must speak to him.” He wandered off to socialise and be seen with the big American, leaving Natasha and Errington together.

They began with small talk, Errington learning that Natasha had been born in the north, that she had been nick-named Natasha when she was just a little girl by a Russian advisor who had been a friend of her father, a member of Ho Chi Minh’s inner circle until accused of being a spy for the south, charged with treason and summarily shot.

Natasha’s mother had gathered her brood of five small children and, with the help of friends, fled south to Saigon.

“There’s so much tragedy in Vietnamese families,” Errington mused. “I don’t think I’ve met a family yet which hasn’t lost at least one member to this terrible war, or the war against the French or all the other wars in Vietnam for the past 200 years.”

Natasha shrugged her shoulders. “C’est la vie Vietnam,” she said matter of factly.

This resignation to fate amongst the Vietnamese had never ceased to amaze Errington. It was probably the major reason why westerners could not understand the Vietnamese attitude to the war. They had no understanding of

the gentleness of these people, their artistic beauty, the exploitation they had suffered for so long, their desire for peace and harmony, no more tragedy, no more loss of loved ones.

He discussed these things easily with Natasha, and time flew by. Only when the Filipino band stopped torturing the Beatles and Bob Dylan and began packing up their instruments did they realise everyone else had gone home. It was 4 a.m.

Emboldened by the American beers he had drunk, he leant forward to kiss Natasha on the cheek but she turned her mouth to his, welcoming his approach. Their lips met gently, their bodies joined as Errington's arms encircled her slim waist, pulling her towards him. She came, opening her mouth and pushing her tongue between his lips, welcoming the heat springing into her body.

Then she realised who she was, who he was, where they were, the danger he would not know. She pulled away from him, quickly, her tiny hands pushing into his chest. "No, no," she stumbled. "Not now . . . here . . . no . . . I call you." And she rushed from the room into the depths of the mansion.

Errington was speechless, confused. One second he was flying as high as he'd ever flown, the next . . . standing like a shag on a rock, completely abandoned.

She had said she'd call, he mused, as the cold of the concrete floor in the general's garage seeped through his thin mattress and brought his thinking back to the present. She hadn't, and he blamed the NVA offensive, not unreasonably, for that. If she had been just half as busy as he'd been he could understand her not having the time to do so and the phone system only worked 10 per cent of the time anyway. Donkey's fascinating little puzzle gave him the half-excuse he needed to contact her, as discreetly as he could, through Dong's office.

CHAPTER 9

Donkey's job with Major-General Melville Smith had developed a pattern. Quite often there was little to do during the day because the general was out playing war-games or hatching conspiracies with either his battalion commanders down at Nui Dat or the Americans anywhere in the country.

Brigadier Bradshaw handled the day-to-day running of the "home office". Because of the nature of his sifting and vetting job, the brigadier put through little correspondence which could not be handled by Nickoli himself.

Donkey used this time to catch up on his letter writing. There always seemed to be half a dozen letters waiting to be answered. And there was probably another ten people waiting at home for a letter which he had promised to write "from over there".

It was Allison, of course, who kept him the busiest. He wrote long, detailed letters to her every couple of days and it was this detail which caused her to comment that she thought he was changing somehow. Yes, he replied, I suppose I am. It would be a rare bloke who was not changed by Vietnam.

"I've just heard on the local U.S. military radio news that 2500 NVA were killed near Saigon in the past four days," he wrote. "That will give you some indication of how hard the Yanks are hitting the VC. From what we've heard, the VC offensive is making big news back home. Over here it's a damn joke. The attack is still going on but it's the Yanks and the South Vietnamese who are doing all the attacking. If I had a tape recorder I could record right now for you the boom of rockets, bombs and artillery shells in the distance."

She had asked him if he had known the four Australian reporters who had been killed in Cholon. He had known one. "He was only a young bloke, 26 I think, I was introduced to him about three weeks ago. But if you go driving into areas held by the VC then you're asking for trouble. They stuck their necks out to get a story and they became the story instead. I suppose I sound rather unsympathetic. That's what the Army teaches you. Kill or be killed. As long as you're alive, Sin Loi (stiff luck) about the other bloke. It's got to be this way to prevent you going around the bend. That reporter who got out of the attack had to be put in a straitjacket. He went crazy with shock.

"By the way, about the letter and tape you haven't received — again. I'm getting sick of this buggered up mail system and I'm going to kick up one hell

of a stink. This sort of thing shouldn't happen."

While it was good to have that time at work for writing letters, it did have its drawbacks. If the general had been out for the day he invariably arrived back in the office in the late afternoon and produced work at a staggering rate. Even before the latest offensive, it was a rare occasion when Donkey caught the five thirty "knock-off" bus back to the Canberra. Sometimes he didn't finish his work until nine o'clock. And while the battle raged around Saigon, there was no such thing as a day off. Or a night for that matter. If he worked back, he would still be driven to the general's house when he finished for his guard duties.

Even when there wasn't a "war" on, Monday was always the busiest day of the week and certainly the most interesting. It was SITREP (Situation Report) Day, the day when COMAFV reported back to the politicians in Canberra on events of the past week and what was likely to happen next. The section of the SITREP that covered the past was usually dull and boring, listing battles, bodycounts, caches of weapons or rice captured.

The Americans thought it most important to capture bags of rice. If they had all the rice, the VC would be starved into submission as well as being bombed into oblivion. It seemed odd to Donkey that the blatantly open Saigon black market had enough tinned US Forces tucker to supply two VC armies — and more than likely did. To the Yanks though, that was different. That was business. And Ned loved it too. He found it very easy to make money.

It was the second part of the report, the crystal ball gazing bit, which gave everybody a bit of fun. Well, almost everybody.

Around 1100 hours every Monday morning the head of Intelligence Section, Major Horace Swanker, swaddled in a self imagined aura of power and importance, would burst into Donkey's office, a sheaf of papers tucked imperiously under an arm. He looked the part, and it fooled some, but beneath the major's crowns on his shoulder boards hid an enormous inferiority complex. He was by no means a big man, his hunched shoulders giving him a gnome-like appearance. When he straightened his bald head probably touched the height bar at five foot eight. He was not an attractive man. His bug eyes were furtive, forever seeking nasty things which might make his miserable life even more wretched. They always found him first, quite unexpectedly, and dealt him cruel lash after cruel lash. At forty years of age he had gone as far as he could in life, even in the Army. Indeed, how he

had managed to become an officer, let alone one in Intelligence Corps, was a great Army conundrum in itself.

"Private Simpson," he ordered officiously on their first such meeting, "here's the SITREP for General Melville-Smith. It's Top Secret, of course, and most urgent . . ."

"You're late sir," accused Donkey, peeking sternly over the top of his glasses, "the general has asked me already where it is."

That was all Donkey needed to say to prick the bubble, to crack the major's eggshell-thin self esteem. "Oh God," he whimpered. He was terrified of Big Al and it showed. If he'd been a dog, thought Donkey, he would now be on his back with his tail between his legs.

He thrust the SITREP towards Donkey, almost begging him to take it.

"Quick, you'd better get it to him then. I'm sure the general will find it all straight forward." He fled.

Donkey looked down at the sheaf of papers in his hand. It included intelligence reports from the Yanks and Vietnamese that the major had picked up that morning; reports from battalion commanders at Nui Dat detailing Australian operations completed and those being planned, as well as the major's own summations of bits and pieces and of the report as a whole. Bits of paper were stapled or taped to other bits of paper, signal scraps interwoven here and there and mixed in with the lot was the major's tiny, insignificant, illegible scrawl.

Big Al's really going to love this lot, thought Donkey. He walked into the general's office.

"Major Swanker has just dropped in the SITREP sir," said Donkey, handing over the condemning evidence.

"This?" quizzed the general holding the report out in front of him between thumb and forefinger like a second-hand field dressing. "This is the SITREP?" He squinted at the major's hand-writing and shook his head in despair before handing it back to Donkey.

"Good God, type it up for me please Private Simpson and I'll see if I can make any sense of it then."

An hour later the general demanded the SITREP again. "I'm sorry sir," Donkey apologised, "I've had to refer several things back to the major, things I couldn't understand or read but I'm almost finished. About ten minutes I reckon, sir."

"I sincerely hope we can get this signal off to Canberra today, Private

Simpson."

"Yes sir. Won't be long sir."

The general retreated with a snort.

Two minutes after receiving the typed version of the SITREP, the general called Donkey into his office. "Is this what Major Swanker gave you?" he queried.

"Yes sir."

"You haven't mixed some of it up, missed anything or messed it about have you?"

"No sir. As I said before, I had to double-check several things with the major. It's word for word."

"But it doesn't make any sense, Private Simpson. It's all over the place like a mad woman's sh . . ." He chopped himself off. It really didn't do for generals to use unseemly language or criticise fellow officers in front of ORs. “Get me Major Swanker would you."

"Sir."

The first mistake the major made when going into the general's office was to forget to shut the door. Captain Brown, Donkey and Jackman enjoyed the show as the general's voice boomed through the doorway, lashing strips off the major on its way.

"Where in the name of God did you get these precious pieces of information from, major?"

"The Americans sir. At the briefing this morning. And . . ."

"It's sheer and utter crap! Major, you're supposed to have enough intelligence to see through smokescreens, twaddle and bullshit when you're poked in the eye with it! You're supposed, as my Intelligence Officer, to sift the wheat from the chaff, to make some sense out of this nonsense."

"But sir, the Americans . . ."

". . . everything the Americans say, think and do needs analysing major, analysing. If we sent this off to our politicians they'd laugh themselves silly. Or sillier than what they already are. Take it away major and come up with some commonsense in your redraft. No, wait a minute." The general looked at his watch. The afternoon was half gone already. "We don't have time for more stuffing around. I'll have to rewrite it myself," he grunted, looking down with distaste at the document in front of him. "Next week major, make bloody sure you get it right the first time!"

"Sir!"

"And major, don't you ever present a report to my office in such an appalling state again. Hear?"

"Sir."

Major Swanker had been chewed up and spat out. And when he left the general's office he looked like it. He twitched and shook and worse still, he knew it was only seven days until he'd probably get another vicious knee in the groin.

The general struggled with the SITREP for another hour. The politicians not only had to have situations appraised, but be appeased as well. In one way or another they had to be told that *the war, gentlemen, goes well.* He called Donkey into his office.

"Here's the first part of this report for you to start on Private Simpson. I'm still working on the predictions for this week though. Don't believe a word of this rubbish that the Yanks have sold to Major Swanker. Ask Paul — er Brigadier Bradshaw — to come in would you, I want to discuss this with him."

When Donkey got the second half of the SITREP it was relatively short and to the point. The Yanks had predicted that having been beaten out of Saigon, the NVA would retreat to lick its wounds. There would be an extended period of relative calm, they said. Uncle Sam had kicked the shitter out of them once again.

Big Al didn't believe a word of it.

Sure, the push against Saigon had been repulsed. Or had it? Had the NVA made their point and withdrawn? The attack was certainly followed by a massive "peace talks" propaganda campaign from Hanoi.

No, surmised the general, Hanoi had never meant the attack on Saigon to "take" the city; it had been merely to harass and embarrass. In that it had succeeded. It had gained world-wide publicity and been capitalised on politically. No, the NVA had not been "beaten" in Saigon. It had executed a neat "tactical withdrawal". It would not "go back home to lick its wounds", it would simply return to its normal modus operandi — hit and run. It had gained enormous political mileage out of the allegations of nuclear missiles being stored in Saigon and, for the time being, would be satisfied with pursuing that. In a political sense, ground “won” and then given back was totally immaterial. So too were the lives of thousands of its soldiers.

When Donkey typed the bit about the nukes, he blanched. There's no way, he tried to convince himself, *no way* anything I could have done or said

which could have had such far-reaching consequences. *No way!*

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Donkey had been on guard duty at the general's house for a week before Big Al called the whole thing off. The battle for Saigon had been all but won and he could see that the patience of his men was wearing thin. Working all day at the Free World Building in the stinking heat and then having to go on guard duty at night between naps on the hard concrete floors had exhausted his men. They needed showers — badly — clean clothes and a rest.

He issued orders to return to billets. And a skeleton crew only was to stay back at the Free World Building while everyone else had the next day off. The men cheered. The 5.30 bus was crowded as it threaded its way quickly through the thin and nervous Saigon traffic. The vast majority of Saigonese weren't raising their heads just yet, despite the fact that their curfew had been shortened — in most districts — to allow business to resume during daylight hours.

About two blocks from the Canberra the traffic suddenly disappeared altogether. The bus was alone on deserted streets. Nervousness quickly replaced the air of jubilation. The bus lurched around the last corner on the route to the Canberra and came face to face with troops from the elite ARVN Rangers Battalion. A tank stood in the middle of an intersection only half a block from the Canberra, spitting shells down a side street, the crimson bereted soldiers lounging around behind nearby corners while the tank softened things up for their assault.

It appeared as though the Rangers had already had one go and failed. Bodies were dotted along the street in front of the tank, arms and legs at crazy, broken angles. Bright blue and purple intestines spilled from shattered torsos in bloody pools. A mangy brown dog sniffed at one, then another, and another. He cocked his leg on the third, pissing on the mangled meat.

"Christ! I think somebody forgot to tell Big Al there's still a war going on out here," said Tiny Tim, bouncing his bus over a concrete mid-street plantation, driving around behind the tank and pulling up in front of the Canberra.

"Get out youse bastards! I don't want to hang about here too long!" This time Tiny really meant it. Nobody needed telling. They sprinted from the bus into the Canberra, sighing with relief once inside, and ran for the showers.

Despite the warries outside, it was bloody good to be back "home".

"I didn't know the gut was that color." It was Bluey Smith, from the Typing Pool. He was standing in one of several subdued groups dotted around the bar, kitchen and lounge area talking about the bodies. It was the first time most of them had ever seen the carnage of war.

"They were all Rangers too, I think. I didn't see any VC — no black pyjamas." Juice Lemon.

"What did you think when you first saw them?" Jansen.

"Well, nothing I s'pose. Now that you mention it, it's funny isn't it. I mean I didn't really feel a thing. They were just fucked up bodies lying on the street." Smith.

"Like on TV." Ned.

"No . . . no, not like on TV. They were real, all right. I suppose a bloke should feel something. They are our allies after all, and those Rangers blokes are supposed to be the best. But no, I didn't really feel a thing." Smith.

"Neither did I." Simpson.

"Same same me." Lemon.

"I thought there must have been something wrong with me because I felt the same way — nothing. Then I got to thinking, what if they were Australian bodies, what then?" The Padre.

"Ah, that's different." Myxo.

"I think I woulda thrown up." Lemon.

"Especially with all that blue gut laying all over the gutters." Ned.

The group lapsed into silence, each staring into the depths of his can. Bodies wearing Australian insignia floated darkly around inside, arms and legs twisted, guts spilling purple.

Donkey broke the morbid spell. "Anybody want another tin?" he asked quietly.

When Donkey went to bed that night, his belly full of beer and his head spinning, he went to sleep quickly. And he dreamed about Jilly. She was dressed in black pyjamas, wore car tyre sandals and a peasant's straw hat. Her teeth had gone betel nut black and she grinned evilly, like a corpse. She waved an AK47 rifle in triumph.

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When the others decided to go to bed, Errington and Ned said they'd have

one for the road. Ned shouted the cans and settled back down in the lounge .

"Poor old Donkey," Charlie Errington chuckled, "he's shittin' himself."

"What about?"

"You've read all that fuss in Paris about the nuclear missiles which are supposed to be stored out at Tan Son Nhut?"

"Yeah."

"Well I know who tipped off Hanoi."

John "Jackman" Nickoli was nearby in conversation with another group but he couldn't help over-hearing part of what Errington had said. He pricked his ears.

"Oh yeah, who?"

"Donkey."

"Donkey? What the hell are you talking about?"

"He as much as told me he did," Errington grinned. "Didn't you know he's a secret anti-war demonstrator? Didn't you know he was a peace-at-any-price prophet?"

"What? Bullshit!"

Errington laughed loudly. "Hang on a minute. Let me tell you the full story."

Nickoli reckoned he didn't need to hear the full story. He was amazed at his luck. This was just what he'd been waiting for. Revenge! Simpson would cop his now. It was Simpson's fault, he reasoned, for the humiliation he had copped over the Operation Jerilderie file. Not to mention the hot spaghetti and meatballs later that night. He had sworn revenge and now he was going to get it. Simpson a spy! His brigadier would have to be told at the first opportunity.

Nickoli didn't wait for the rest of Errington's story. He dashed off to bed, rubbing his hands with glee, catching Charlie Errington’s attention, until he reached the first landing and disappeared. What’s with him, he wondered.

***

When the next SITREP came in from Major Swanker, Big Al was mightily pleased with his crystal ball gazing for the previous week. His forecasts had been spot on.

"I predicted that," he beamed at Donkey. He read on. "And that." He finished reading the part which dealt with this-was-the-week-that-was.

"I predicted the whole bloody lot! Now, let's see what Major Swanker and

his American and ARVN friends have in store for us this week." He delved into the crystal ball section of the SITREP. When the major had handed Donkey his report earlier that morning, it had been prepared only a little better than the previous week and Swanker begged Donkey to type it up this time before showing the general. But once again, the major had prefaced all his own comments with "the Americans believe that . . ." That way, he had figured, he couldn't make a mistake. He could always pass the buck or handpass a hot potato. Where he did express an opinion of sorts it was heavily disguised in gobbledegook and warspeak and followed by "but on the other hand . . ." It was unnecessarily long, tedious and incomprehensible.

"Not again!" groaned Big Al. "You've obviously read this Private Simpson, what do you think of it? Did you understand it?"

"It seems to be two bob each way sir."

"Two bob each way! Ha! Yes, very good Private Simpson. That's exactly what it is. Now tell me this: can you have two bob each of two in a two-horse race and still not manage to back the winner?"

Donkey didn't answer. He didn't think the general expected him to.

"Ask the Chief of Staff to come in and we'll pick this week's winner, despite this . . . this . . ." He picked up the report from his desk and slammed it down again, finally finding the words he was seeking. . . "Major Two-Bob". He smirked. He rather liked that. Yes indeed, that was quite good! Major Two-Bob. Ha!

***

It was while delivering Donkey's typed version of Major Swanker's SITREP to the general's office after Swanker had checked it that Errington literally bumped into Natasha. He was charging up the stairs two at a time when he swung wide around a corner and her uniform materialised suddenly in front of him. She gasped as he thrust out his hands and grabbed her arms to prevent him knocking her over.

"Natasha!" he gasped. "Oh, I'm sorry. I almost flattened you."

She recovered quickly, smiling at his clumsiness. "You very fast mover John. Too fast!"

Errington thought he caught a double entendre and smiled broadly. "But Natasha, what are you doing here?"

"Since offensive I work here, in General Cassidy's offices on ground floor.

General Dong has loaned me to the Americans for liaison duties."

"Here, in this building?" Errington couldn't believe his luck.

"Yes. But I no can talk now. Where you?"

"Fourth floor. Intelligence office. There's a sign on the door."

"I find." She turned and daintily continued down the stairs.

He followed her down for a step. "When?"

"Later . . . today." She disappeared on to the lower floor.

Errington was ecstatic but as the day ground to a close his euphoria waned and he began to doubt she really was interested in him. She didn't come. Then five minutes before the bus was due to leave, Jilly walked in and handed him a sealed envelope. "From General Cassidy's office," she said disinterestedly.

His heart leapt as he ripped it open. It contained an address in the French quarter and a cryptic note: *meet me here before curfew, 6 pm - Natasha.*

He looked at his watch with a start. That gives me a bare 30 minutes! And I need a shower, shampoo and shave. Too bad, I'll have to go stinkin'. He grabbed his rifle, flew out into the street and waved down a taxi.

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When Earl "Cowboy" Cassidy swaggered into Big Al's office suite unannounced around mid afternoon, Donkey couldn't believe his eyes. *Those sixguns!*

"Hiyall!" he roared. "Is Big Al in?" It was the same general Donkey had bumped into at Tan Son Nhut when he'd first arrived in country. The three-starred cap was the same, the build the same: six foot three with broad shoulders. The cigar. And Donkey could see now that the sixguns were pearl-handled Colt 45s, slung low on both hips in beautifully tooled tan leather holsters each studded with three gold stars. The buckle on the wide, filigreed belt featured a Texas longhorn. This time he wore dun-coloured combat clothes and Australian boots, which were very popular with the Americans. Donkey wondered if Ned had sold them to him.

As he removed the aviator glasses and cap, Donkey noted steel-grey hair, no more than a quarter inch long, circled his head like a back-to-front horseshoe. The top of his head shone like a signal mirror and his blue-black eyes flashed like Morse code lamps. His nose was thin, hooked and long, overhanging fleshy lips in which he rolled the cigar with his tongue, saliva occasionally dribbling on to his thrusting chin. He sucked hard and noisily, wrenched the cigar from his mouth and huffed a huge pall of blue smoke into

the air. He made Donkey feel very uneasy indeed .

"General!" answered Big Al from his inner office, deferring to the American's extra star, "this is a pleasant surprise. Come on in." He jumped out from behind his desk and met Cassidy halfway, at the door to his own office. "What brings you out of the lion's den?"

"Waall, tomorrow I'm gettin' out from behind ma desk and takin' maself on a gook shoot in ma command chopper. Now ah knows you're an action man too, Al, and wondered if you'd like to come along for the ride?"

"Well, thanks for thinking of me but . . ."

"Hey, c'mon, man. We'll just sit up there in ma ship — it's a Cobra gunship — an' have ourselves a good time jus' shootin' 'em down as they run." His hands flashed to his hips and re-appeared brandishing the handguns. He spun quickly and faced the window, as though he was going to gun down Wyatt Earp through the glass.

"Pow! Pow! Pow!" he roared.

Shoot 'em down like vermin. No, like ducks in a shooting gallery. Donkey was amazed. *All's fair in love and war* was certainly more than an empty cliche. It was for real. And then Donkey realised who Cassidy was; he'd written enough memos and notes for Big Al to him. Cowboy Cassidy was officially the head honcho in American Intelligence.

He wasn't even a real 'grunt'. There was no mud on his boots. What he was proposing to do was take a day off for some sport.

Melville-Smith declined. He had another appointment, he said.

"In fact, it's with your boss, Westmoreland."

"Waall, cain't keep you from that, Al. Pity. It'll be fun. Sure beats shit out of playin' golf. Ha! ha! ha!"

He wandered over towards the door and suddenly stopped. "Al, there was one other thing." He turned back towards the door and closed it. He walked back towards Al's desk. "Sorry to have to do that, but you'll understand after what I have to say."

"Oh?"

"Ah'll get right to the point. As you no doubt seen, we've been coppin' real shit — and ah mean shit — from Washington on that Hanoi claim that we got nukes here in Saigon. Right?"

"I can imagine Nixon's not very happy."

"Hoooo! So much shit's hit the fan the fan's broke. And Westmoreland says to me, Cowboy, you find out where this story come from and you kick ass.

And then hand him over to me so ah can kick ass. Waall Al, ah think ah've found me some ass — and it belongs to one of your boys."

"What!"

Cassidy told Big Al how two MPs had found an Australian wandering around a high security area at Tan Son Nhut airbase, and a particularly sensitive hangar in particular, with a camera. He had been apprehended, interviewed and allowed to leave after the captain of the guard had been assured that it was all an innocent mistake.

"Said his name was Brian Simpson and that he was your personal secretary."

Big Al went white.

When Nickoli saw Cassidy close the door of the general's office, he banked on them being tied up together for quite some time. And that meant the Brigadier would be free for a chat. He grabbed his chance. He went into Brigadier Bradshaw's office.

"Sir, have you got a minute?"

Bradshaw leaned back in his chair and looked up. He saw immediately that Nickoli had a problem. "Sure. What's up?"

When Cassidy left Melville-Smith's office, Big Al immediately called his COS in and shut the door. "Paul, we've got a problem."

"Actually sir, we might have to make that two."

"You've got one too? Okay, shoot, we'll get yours out of the way first. I think mine will be more difficult."

"Corporal Nickoli has just given me some rather disturbing information which concerns Private Simpson."

"Christ, he's my problem too."

The two generals quickly sorted out that they had two different stories which would probably boil down to only one problem, but it had the potential to cause an explosion bigger than Hiroshima.

***

When Natasha opened the door to her apartment Errington was stunned. She was wearing a white miniskirt which accentuated the beautiful even tan of her shapely legs. The scalloped neckline of her tight apricot top showed the beginning of the cleavage between her round, firm breasts. Immediately he saw she was not wearing, did not need, a bra. Her hair shone silver on the deepest black, and just a touch of make-up and lipstick transformed the Army captain into an apparition. Errington stood goggle-eyed, mouth open.

Natasha giggled self-consciously. “You like?”

He snapped out of his trance. “Like? Oh Natasha, you’re bloody beautiful!” he gushed.

She laughed, a tingling, tinkling sound, grabbed him by the hand and pulled him into her apartment, closing and carefully locking the door behind them. She came to him, arms open, reaching up to him because the top of her head was just below his chest height. They kissed. Her perfume, like the aroma of fresh flowers, overwhelmed him and he suddenly realised his stench, from sweating in the heat all day, must be gagging for her. He pulled back, a little ashamed.

“Natasha, I need a shower! Why didn’t you give me more time? I feel terrible. I could have brought you something, flowers maybe . . . I just had time to grab my rifle and run to beat the curfew.”

She laughed again. “Silly John! Where you find flowers in Saigon?”

“Yeah, that’s a point I suppose.”

“Here,” she said leading him by the hand, “you have shower, then Natasha make you dinner, then we talk, talk, talk. Okay?”

The shower was wonderful, but he had been under the water less than three minutes when she drew the curtain aside and joined him. He was stunned by the perfection of her body, his eyes gorging on her curves, water droplets clinging to her breasts, nipples firm and pointed. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled gently. He put his arms around her, slid them beneath her bottom and lifted her up, on to him. She was ready.

True to her word Natasha made dinner but much, much later, after they had run to her bed, dripping wet, and exhausted themselves.

After dinner their lovemaking was less frantic, and even more satisfying. And between times, they talked, until dawn.

CHAPTER 10

"Donkey, you old bastard! How are ya!"

It was Bob Harding, one of Donkey's mates from his clerical course at Puckapunyal. They had also worked together at Randwick Barracks for a few weeks before Donkey was flown out to Saigon to become the general's whizkid.

"Hey Bob, great to see you! When did you get in?" The two mates shook hands.

"On the last charter, three days ago."

"Really, I haven't seen you around. Where have you been? Where are you working?"

"I'm buggered if I know. My head's still spinning. I flew in in the middle of this shit and haven't been out of HQ. This is the first time I've seen the Canberra. Not bad, eh!"

"Yeah, it sure beats playing soldiers out in the boonies. Hey, I'll shout you a beer."

"Is it like this around here all the time? I mean, outside?" The tank in the side street was still spitting shells casually, about one every five minutes.

"No, but we had a bit of a scare about a week ago . Before that it was fairly peaceful really, apart from the traffic and Nogs everywhere. You'll see when they lift the curfew."

"Thank God for that. I didn't come over here to get shot at." Harding drained his can. "My shout."

"I'll be in that." Suddenly Donkey shouted: "Up the old red rooster!" Harding looked around from the bar in alarm as Donkey was answered by everyone on the ground floor. *"Moooooooooorrrrrrrrreeeeee piss!"*

Interrupted conversations around the room were immediately rejoined as though nothing had happened. Harding stared in amazement.

"What the hell was that all about?" he asked, handing Donkey a frothing can.

"Nothing really, just traditional. I think there's going to be one helluva piss-up tonight though. The boys are thirsty."

"I reckon they're all half-whacked already."

"No mate, that's not piss. That's the Saigon sickness. I've got it and I've only been here seven weeks.

"Saigon sickness?"

"Troppo mate, crackers, bonkers, the place drives you up the bloody wall after awhile."

"What are you doing here."

"Fucked if I know mate, what are you?"

"No, what job, where are you working?"

"Oh. I'm the general's secretary."

"What, the big boss man himself?"

"Yep."

"That sounds like a great job. How'd you get that?"

"Fair dinkum mate, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. It's bloody bizarre, a perfect example of The Great Army Stuff-up."

"It couldn't be any worse than what's happened to me, I can tell you."

"Another one, eh. Nothing surprises me old mate. Buy me another tin and tell me all about it."

"It's your shout."

"Oh, right. Hang on a tick."

"Up the old red rooster?" Harding didn't yell.

"Now you're getting the hang of it." Donkey grinned and got two more cans of VB from the bar. "Right, let's hear the classic Army fuck-up according to Private Harding."

Harding settled back into a lounge chair. "I was posted here into Legal Branch as a court reporter which I thought was terrific because it's a sergeant's job. They told me back home that I couldn't be promoted to sergeant but I would get two hooks as soon as I got here and would be paid a sergeant's wage, the higher duties allowance bullshit. I didn't give a stuff about the hooks but that sergeant's pay was bloody terrific.

"Anyhow, I should have known better. When I got here I was told that job had been filled by somebody else — jobs like that aren't left laying about I suppose."

"So what have they done with you?"

"I'm in the bloody typing pool."

"The typing pool! The arsehole office! God almighty, once you're in that hole you're stuck mate. You'll be a private for the rest of the war! Still, don't feel too bad about it. I'm doing a sergeant's job on a private's wage. You're not on your Pat."

"How come?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you about it some time, but hang on a minute, you said you were posted to a court reporter's job."

"Yeah."

"That's what you did in Civvy Street, if I remember correctly. In New South Wales, for the cops or something wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"You've got to have pretty good shorthand for a job like that don't you?"

"Yeah, a hundred and fifty words a minute. That's what I do anyway. You only need a hundred and twenty really."

"What's your typing speed?"

"Seventy."

Donkey was almost jumping out of his skin. Harding was the answer to all his prayers. He was just the lever Donkey needed to get that job in Public Relations. If he played his cards right. Shit yes! It had to be done right or the Army would be sure to stuff everything up without really trying.

"Bob me old mate, I reckon I can get you the best job in the Free World building!"

"What?"

"Look, I can't tell you about it yet but it's a top job. I've got to talk to a few people first, work a few angles. You know what the Army's like — one false step and you get stuffed up."

"I couldn't possibly be more stuffed around than what I am now."

"Right. Leave it with me. I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

And there was something else he had to follow up too, with Bassett.

***

General Melville-Smith had told “Cowboy” Cassidy he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. There had to be some mistake. He couldn’t for the life of him imagine Simpson being involved in anything associated with the nukes story. But he’d investigate it and get back. Cassidy agreed reluctantly.

But after hearing what Nickoli had told his brigadier, the general was even more astonished. “It’s just too fantastic, beyond belief!” he muttered.

"So," the general asked his chief of staff, "what do you suggest we do? What's the best way to handle this? Do we simply have Simpson front and centre and hit him with what we have, which is all hearsay and pretty thin even then, or what?"

"I think perhaps there are a couple of things we might keep in mind here Al

. . ."

"What's that?"

"Us," said the Chief of Staff sombrely. "If this leaks, if any of this silly, bloody political mess gets out, whatever it turns out to be, you and I are not going to look too good. And if it's really messy we can kiss our careers goodbye."

"Yes, you're right. But at the moment we're just stumbling around in the dark. We don't know whether Simpson's completely innocent, a bloody fool or a spy."

"I don't, for one moment, believe he's a spy, Al. Or, as Nickoli says, an anti-war agitator. He's just not the type. He's a real country boy. Wouldn't know his arse from his elbow when it comes to politics."

"All the same, I think that under the circumstances we have to assume the worst. He was a journalist, you know."

"On a small town country paper."

"Okay, let's go quietly for a start."

"Can we hand this over to Swanker? After all, it's his territory."

"Hmm. I don't like the idea much but I suppose he is my intelligence officer. I just wish he was more bloody intelligent, not to mention competent!"

"What if I speak discreetly to Errrington and Bassett first," Bradshaw suggested. "Just to make sure we get their versions of Simpson's story up front."

"Good idea."

***

At the first opportunity next morning Donkey was down in the PR Office talking to the boss, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Drake, a long, languid man who had the no-nonsense yet easy going nature of the professional journalist. He rested his laurels on his competence, not his shoulder boards.

"Sir, I'd like to talk to you about that clerk-caption writer job you've got going down here."

"Sure Donkey, are you still interested?"

"Yes sir, very much so!"

"Well, I'd like to have you down here but I can't knock off the general's secretary, you understand."

"Yes sir, I realise that, but if I could swing it from my end, would you be

interested?"

"Yes, of course. I'd much prefer somebody in the job who knows something about journalism. Apparently the bloke Canberra is planning to send me is just a clerk. What they don't seem to understand is that I want a caption writer first, clerk second. I can get any drongo from the typing pool if there is any extra clerk's work we may need doing. Most of that would be typing up stories which my reporters have written and that's more a journalist's work than a clerk's. Sure, if you can swing it I'd love to have you down here."

"Thanks sir, I think that's all I'll need."

"I think you'll need a hell of a lot more than that, Donkey, to beat the Army system. Best of luck, I wish I could help you more but I'm hamstrung."

"I think I've got an ace up my sleeve sir."

Right, thought Donkey, that's cleared away one hurdle. But before he tackled the second, Harding, he had to talk to Bassett.

As he walked out of Drake's office, Donkey motioned to Bassett to follow him out on to the balcony. "What's up?" Bassett asked.

"I've just been talking to the colonel about that clerk-caption writer's job here but that's not what I want to talk about. Remember when you saved me from those Yanks at Tan Son Nhut?

"Yeah."

"And I told you I'd seen some missiles in a hangar?"

"Yeah. We've made the headlines, mate. Around the world."

"Shit! That's just what I didn't want to hear. Who did you tell, fucking Reuters?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't think I told anyone. As I told you at the time, if, in the fantastic circumstance that they were nukes, it would be the best story you'd never write."

"Some bastard has. I'm just shit-scared that somehow it will be traced back to me! I'd probably be shot if it was. And yet I can't imagine how I could possibly be involved. I haven't told anyone."

"Honestly, I haven't given it a thought since."

"What do you reckon I should do?"

"Look, you're worrying about nothing. And I reckon the best thing you can do is shut up. Know nothing, see nothing, hear nothing. Ha! You could even pretend you're a soldier! You know, *mind in neutral, there's a good lad.* Sometimes it can come in handy."

Donkey wasn’t sure but he was relieved that Bassett hadn’t spread the story. He smiled. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. Talk to you later.” He rushed off to the typing pool and pulled Bob Harding aside.

"Remember that job I was talking to you about last night?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Mine."

"What! Yours? You've got to be joking! You told me last night it was a great job! Why would you want to give it to me?"

"Look mate, now I'll tell you about The Great Army Stuff-Up According to Donkey Simpson." Donkey told Harding all about how he got his job with the general, right from the beginning, and then about his plans for a job-swap.

"Bob old mate, I'm a bloody journalist, not a clerk. There's a job going in PR that I want and I think I can swing it — but only if you take my job. The general wants a crash-hot shorthand-typist, or he thinks he does, and I certainly don't fit that bill. You're it. As soon as he hears about you, he'll jump. And I do a trade."

"Well, I dunno Donkey. Working for a general! Crikey! I dunno . . ."

"Look, he's a great bloke to work for, once you get to know him. It's a dead-set easy soda of a job. Oh, and no guard duties either!"

"Well, that sounds better."

"Right, leave it with me. I'll set it up and get back to you." Hurdle No.2 cleared successfully.

***

When Bradshaw heard Bassett’s version of events, his mind began to ease somewhat. And Errington’s story corroborated it, differing vastly from Nickoli's. He said he hadn't, for one moment, taken the connection between Donkey's experience and the Paris revelation seriously.

"Actually Donkey raised it with me a couple of days ago, sir. He was worried about it. He thought that somehow, because of his big mouth, the story had got to Hanoi. I told him I thought it was just a fantastic coincidence. Then he asked me about Jilly, our interpreter, and whether she was trustworthy, because he said she had probably overhead him telling me the story."

Bradshaw sat up suddenly. "What? Who's this Jilly?"

Errington explained. "Major Swanker values her very highly sir."

"Does he now. Just how highly?" Bradshaw had sensed something.

"Well, ummm, apart from her interpreting and translating duties she has provided us with some very interesting information from time to time sir. I know the major has won quite a few points with the Americans — General Cassidy — because of some of it."

"Is that so? Very interesting." Bradshaw pondered a moment before asking the next question. "And do you know, corporal, just what does Miss Jilly get for giving Major Swanker this priceless information?

"Ummm, could I suggest, sir, that you ask the major that question?

"No, corporal, you may not."

"TLC might be one way of putting it sir."

"Thank you corporal. And of course, I will ask the major that question, you may be assured of that."

Errington smiled to himself as he left the brigadier's office. Let's see how his idiot boss handles that!

***

After speaking to Colonel Drake, Donkey went back to his office. There were two signals in his 'in' tray for typing. Naturally, Nickoli hadn't bothered to do them for him despite the fact that he was doing nothing and Brigadier Bradshaw wasn't in his office. He flew through them and took them in to the general.

"Ah sir, I wonder if I could have a word with you?"

"Yes Private Simpson, what is it," he replied absently, his eyes buried in the messages Donkey had just handed to him.

"Remember sir, when I came over here, you were expecting a short-hand typist."

The general's eyes screwed up just a fraction. "Yes."

"Well sir, I think I might be able to find you one."

Big Al leaned back, a sardonic smile cracking his face. "You, Private Simpson, might be able to find me a short-hand typist. The Army couldn't but you can. Do I understand you?"

"Yes sir. He's got one hundred and fifty words a minute shorthand and seventy words per minute typing."

"Good Lord! Where is this superman?"

"In the typing pool sir."

"The typing pool! How did a bloke with qualifications like that get dumped

in the typing pool?"

"He got stuffed around just like I did sir."

"Not to mention a certain general, eh Simpson?"

"Yes sir, not to mention you."

"Well get him down here Simpson. I want to talk to this bloke."

"Ahh, there is a slight problem, sir."

The general raised his eyebrows, his nose sniffing the air. He smelt a rat somewhere. "Well, what is it?"

"If Private Harding — that's his name — was to take over my job here sir I'd like to go down to Public Relations. There's a job coming up there that's more my style. I am a journalist, sir, not a clerk, no matter what the Army might decree."

"I see. You want to do a deal. Private Harding for the PR job."

"Well, I don't know that I'd put . . ."

"That's exactly how I'd put it Simpson. First of all, I want to have a look at this bloke Harding. Your work here has been quite satisfactory despite our misunderstandings at first so I'm not going to kick you out until I'm assured this Private Harding is going to do a better job than you've been doing."

"Thank you sir, and I don't want to end up in the Typing Pool."

"Have you spoken to Colonel Drake about this?"

"Yes sir, he's more than happy to have me."

"I see. You've worked this out pretty thoroughly, eh Simpson? I presume you've spoken to Harding?"

"Yes sir, but . . ."

"And I presume I'm the last to be filled in on this little scheme of yours?"

"It's not quite like that sir," said Donkey alarmed. He needn't have worried. The general was grinning.

"Okay Simpson, let's have a look at this Harding and we'll see if we can deal."

***

The situation was better in some ways than they had thought, Brigadier Bradshaw told Big Al, and worse in others. Nickoli's story should be ignored, he said. There appeared to be some vindictiveness and personal animosity there and he would have to deal with that later. He had sworn Errington and Basset to absolute secrecy. They were especially not to mention anything to

Simpson.

The general nodded in agreement. "Let's look at where we are now. Paul, for the sake of argument, let’s assume that Simpson was the source of the leak, whether he was wittingly involved or not, although I can’t for the life of me imagine he was. So, following on from that, the assumption we have to make is that one of three people, Errington, Bassett or this Jilly, passed on Simpson’s story to the other side.

“Now, I don’t believe it was Errington and I’ll tell you why a little later on. Bassett I don’t know . . .”

“If I’m any judge of character Al, I’d say no chance.”

“Even though it might appeal to his journalistic sense as a good story? He could have whispered in the ear of any one of a number of correspondents who troop through their office down there every day.”

“Perhaps, but the story first appeared from Hanoi, not the west.”

“Yes, good point. So that leaves us with Jilly, does it not?”

"Yes. So what are we going to do about her?"

"I don't suppose we can get rid of her?"

"Difficult. That might upset our friend General Dong no end. He made a great fuss of giving her to us. Said she was the best girl he had. Related, too, I believe.

"All these bloody Nogs of Thieu's come from the same families."

"We might be better off to use that — or her — to our own ends."

"Feed her a red herring and see what happens?"

"Could be useful."

The general scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Yes, you just might be right. There's the other point too, which we have to deal with — the information she's been supplying Swanker. We'll have to talk to him about that. She might be supplying good material to him, as Errington suggested, but she might also be feeding some bullshit mixed in with it. And what's she giving to the other side *from* Swanker?"

"And despite what we might feel about Simpson, we'll have to test him too."

"Yes. I think you and I have to play this one as close to our chests as we can, Paul. Simpson might be innocent and he might not. If the girl's a spy we'll have to nail her red-handed and then consider it quietly with the Viets to avoid embarrassment." He sighed heavily. "Hell, maybe they're both in the clear. But it's certainly a coincidence in a million. Whatever happens, we

have to handle it. We can't let Cowboy in."

"I agree."

“I think we handle this on two fronts. Let’s hand over an investigation of sorts to Swanker. It should put pressure on him so that at least he keeps his mouth shut. The real work will be done by Corporal Errington.

“Errington?”

“Yes. I haven’t told you this before Paul but he’s been particularly useful to me in these areas. He delivered the SITREP to me one day awhile back and insisted on talking to me. Said he had something which he believed should be in the report but which Major Swanker had omitted. I told him, of course, that going over his CO’s head could not be condoned but he was quite insistent so I listened.

“He told me that through his contacts, he had reason to believe our good friend Dong might be working patiently towards a coup against President Thieu. He had nothing stronger than that, he said, but felt I ought to know.

“I told him in no uncertain terms that decision should be left to his CO and that without strong supporting evidence, Swanker had been correct in leaving it off the SITREP.

“You know, he wouldn’t accept that. ‘Sir,’ he said to me, ‘if you want evidence I’ll get it.’ Well Paul, as you know, the manual’s not always right, particularly when you apply it to Vietnamese politics, so I agreed to listen to whatever he could find. Which gives us something else to think about. Of course, I’m interested in politics only insofar as it might affect my military operations. Swanker doesn’t know about this and I’d have the book thrown at me for operating behind my Intelligence Officer’s back, but I suppose it was intuition — and the man’s obvious incompetence I might add — which kept my mouth shut in the first place.

“So what I want you to do is to ask Errington to keep an eye on all players, especially Jilly. I can’t ask him to keep an eye on his own CO but I think he does that anyway. Not a hell of a lot of respect there, I’m afraid. And you’d better tell Swanker about Simpson’s experience, that it is possible Jilly passed on the information, but unlikely, and therefore he must keep an eye on her. At the first sign of any suspicious behavior, he’s to tell you immediately. Does that cover it?”

“I think so,” Bradshaw replied.

Big Al grinned. “And we thought we joined the Army to play soldiers!” The general had been sitting on a corner of his desk. He stood up with a word

of caution. "Paul, as you suggested earlier, if any of this gets out the big losers are going to be you and I. Sure as shit I'm not going to let a pissy little thing like this ruin my career."

"To use the local pidgin, same same me."

Bradshaw turned to leave. “There’s one intriguing question which remains.”

“Yes?”

“Were they really nukes Simpson saw?”

Big Al smiled wryly. “Ask Cowboy that question next time you see him.”

***

The general liked what he saw. Apart from his qualifications, Harding was impressive physically as well. He was six foot one with the broad shoulders and deep chest of a champion swimmer and surfer, which he was. He spoke well, with an impressively deep tone. And, the general thought, he's a bloke who might give me a run for my money on the badminton court. Harding had sandy colored hair, cut short. His eyes were a startling blue, nestling deep below his high forehead and guarding his long, aquiline nose. His smile was crooked, turned down in the left corner of his generous mouth. His strong jaw jutted slightly and a prominent Adam's apple leapt about alarmingly when he spoke.

It took a week for the paperwork transferring Harding to the general's office to go through the huge tangle of red tape but only one day for Jilly to be transferred to the PR office. Colonel Drake had been asking for an interpreter for months but had given up trying. Now, much to his delight, the brigadier had thrust one upon him, virtually unannounced.

Major Two-Bob was surprised by what the brigadier told him. And he was not pleased at all that his China doll was going to be taken from him. "We can't have a suspected spy in your office, major, and Colonel Drake has need of an interpreter as well from time to time," the brigadier had told him gruffly. "She's the only one we've got. The two of you will have to share her. And it seems to me that from a security point of view we’d be better off with her out of your office."

And he was very badly shaken by the brigadier’s addendum. “And by the way major,” he had said,“I’m sure I don’t need to remind you of the very obvious dangers of close liaisons with the natives, particularly in this instance. To use the vernacular, loosed cocks spill more beans than loose

tongues, eh major!”

He had almost choked on that one, but managed to laugh it off with the brigadier. For a moment of panic he thought the brigadier knew something, but then surmised that if he had, the good Major H. Swanker would already be on the passenger manifesto for next week’s flight home. So despite the loss of Jilly from within arm's length of his desk, in one sense he was very relieved. As far as he could tell, nobody suspected him of anything.

He did not for a moment believe his Jilly, his Pearl of the Orient, was a spy. Stupid bastards! he raved to himself, how could she be? She came from the upper classes, the ruling classes, the classes with the power. And her background was Chinese. No way was she going to be part of a plot to hand power to the Vietnamese, the peasants, the hated northerners. It was just too ridiculous to even contemplate.

But he knew he'd better obey orders. He'd keep quiet for a few days, eyes open, and see what happened. He grinned slyly. Maybe, just maybe, this was the sort of information he could use. Sometimes a woman had to be persuaded to do things to especially please her man . . .

***

On the next SITREP day Big Al found he and his source had hit the jackpot again. And Major Two-Bob's self-esteem took another father of a hiding. His new nickname had spread like wildfire and he was living a hell within a hell. He just couldn't get anything right. Even his fellow officers were giving him hell . . .

“Have a bet on the races today, Harry?" He had never been called Horace, only by his mum. It had always been Harry.

"Eh? What? Races? What races?"

"Back home. Randwick."

"Ah no, I didn't know there were races today. And nor am I interested. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, just thought you might be having two bob each way again."

Alone he would whimper with frustrated fury. He was a laughing stock, the butt of every joke. God! Even the ORs were taking the piss out of him! That bastard Simpson! It was all his fault!

It had happened only that day. It had annoyed Donkey and many other ORs for weeks, the way they were treated by Major Two-Bob. It was standard operating procedure to greet and salute officers when they came

across them in corridors or offices. And it was an officer's duty to acknowledge and return these courtesies. Not Major Two-Bob. He would ignore "Good morning sir" and stick the tip of his short stubby nose up between his eyes and try to hide beneath his low cap brim if saluted. Damned riff-raff! He'd hurry by without even a word or a glance.

And so he was set up. He found himself bustling along a balcony corridor when he came face to face with a snappy salute and a bright, brisk "Good morning major!" He allowed himself a quick glance. It was Simpson. Riff-raff. He ignored him and hurried on.

"Two-bob snob!"

The major could hardly believe his ears! He spun around viciously. "What did you say private?" he hissed.

Donkey stopped and turned slowly to face the major, now six paces distant. His salute was still rigidly in place at his forehead, the regulation three fingers below his beret brim.

"I said 'Good morning major' sir. Perhaps the major didn't hear me . . . sir."

"That's not what . . ." He stopped himself mid-sentence. He had noticed a group of ORs another dozen paces behind Simpson, smirking and grinning. Witnesses! His eyes snapped back to Simpson, standing rigidly to attention, his salute still nailed to his forehead. And suddenly he realised he was in a cleft stick again. If he was to take the matter of Simpson's obvious insubordination further, his own behavior in ignoring Simpson's greeting and salute would be brought into question — and Simpson had the witnesses. Of course, they would not have heard Simpson call him a two-bob snob. Oh no, not those bloody snotty-nosed bastards!

Helpless, speechless, he sloppily returned Simpson's salute, spun around and stalked off.

"Thank you . . . sir," Donkey threw after him emphatically. "My arm was getting bloody tired up there." Hoots of laughter from the witnesses flowed around Donkey and chased the major up the stairs at the end of the balcony.

***

During the week it took to get Harding's paperwork through, Donkey began to worry that the deal had backfired,that he would be shunted into the typing pool. All he'd been told by the brigadier was he would remain with the general for a few days teaching Harding the ropes. When Harding finally did

join him, Donkey was thoroughly depressed. Then mid-morning Brigadier Bradshaw called Donkey into his office.

"How's Private Harding settling in?"

"He'll get the hang of it sir."

"Yes, but I want you to stay here for a few more days to make sure he grasps everything. Particularly those SITREPS."

"Yes sir, I know what you mean."

"Now, I suppose you want to know what's happening to you."

"It has been on my mind sir."

"You'll be going to that PR job you want . . ."

"Hey, that's great! I'm rapt."

"I certainly hope so. It's been a damned complicated exercise, Private Simpson, believe you me. You know, of course, that Canberra had already slotted someone into the PR job?"

"Yes sir, Colonel Drake told me."

"Well Canberra wouldn't hear of his posting being changed to a clerk's job in Registry here. Headquarters Company here wouldn't hear of all the paperwork involved. I simply ran up against brick walls everywhere."

"Then how did it work out sir?"

"One star generals do have some clout, son. Don't worry, it's fixed."

***

Donkey and Harding were both on top of the world when they arrived back at the Canberra that evening. They went straight back down to the bar after dumping their rifles in their rooms.

Raising his can in salute, Harding shouted: "Up the old red rooster!" The chorus came in right on beat: "Moooorrree piss!"

Harding and Donkey were joined by Ned who suggested it was about time they went out on the town, particularly now they had a damn good excuse, to celebrate their new jobs. Ned had been in Vietnam almost two months longer than Donkey and had had the benefit of a quiet Saigon between the Tet Offesive in January and the next in May and their resultant curfews to find his way around the city.

Now the battle for Saigon was well and truly over and the curfew shrunk to the hours between 2000and 0600. After a quick bite to eat, Harding and Donkey followed Ned out into the teeming, chaotic streets of Saigon. It was

their first trip out and they tagged along behind their guide in some fear and trepidation.

"Shit, I wish we'd brought our rifles," muttered Harding.

"They'd only be a bloody nuisance," Ned retorted.

"Yeah, but if we get caught without them we'll be in the shit," said Donkey. "We're not supposed to be out without them. And what if some bastard starts shooting at us?"

"Look you bloody girls, stop worrying! Nobody's going to shoot at you. And the MPs won't touch us unless we start causing trouble. And we won't. We're only going out to have a coupla beers and maybe touch up a few sheilas."

Donkey and Harding flashed their eyes in all directions at once along the narrow street. They had to walk around mamasans clad in black pyjamas squatting over sizzling woks on the narrow footpath, their men, mostly old and wizened, perched in doorways smoking foul rollies, the rank odors mixing with the tangy blued air of exhaust smoke from two-stroke motorbikes. Despite the squalor and the filth on the streets, it still seemed exotic, somehow, to Donkey's innocent eyes.

A brisk ten-minute walk brought the trio to a group of about a dozen bars.

Harding, in his eagerness, headed for the door of the first. Ned stopped him. "Nah, not that one. The sheilas in there are dogs. Up here a bit."

From the outside, the bar chosen by Ned looked like the sleaziest of the lot. All had names from the American West. Ned's favorite was called The Texan Bull.

Inside the bar was dim, long and narrow. It looked like a cafe with tables and bench seats for four jammed along both walls. Ned looked around, straining his eyes in the murky, smoky light. Suddenly there was a girlish screech and a tiny figure launched itself into Ned's arms.

"Aaaahhh!" she squealed, "Fanny Numbah Wahn Uc Da Loi! Long time no see, Ned! Looooooonnng time! Where you bin? You buy me Saigon tea!"

Ned grinned proudly at his startled companions as the girl pushed and prodded him on to a bench, chattering incessantly. She was slab-faced, her broad cheekbones almost as prominent as her small, squashed nose. She grinned widely, and Donkey noticed she squinted, probably wore glasses outside the bar, and her brown, bare legs were bandy, like so many Vietnamese. Her fat little breasts threatened to spill from the top of her skin-tight bright yellow minidress as she bounced them in front of Ned's goggling

eyes.

"Hey fellas! Meet Fabulous Fanny. She has too, believe me. It's like a bloody bear trap! Hey Fanny, get a coupla girls for me mates."

As Fanny waved to the other non-attached girls congregated at the back of the bar, Donkey began stammering. "Ah look, I don't want a bloody sheila! What the bloody hell goes on here?"

Donkey's protests were too late. He and Harding were quickly set upon by two girls who gently but firmly nudged them into seats. "Numbah Wahn Uc Da Loi," they crooned, "You buy me Saigon tea?" Donkey and Harding just looked at one another startled.

The two girls suddenly exchanged quick glances and began jabbering in Vietnamese before bursting into giggles.

"Ha!," said Ned, "they've twigged you two already. Newies! You've won yourselves a couple of hearts fellas!"

Donkey was speechless. A black and gold toothed grin appeared over his left shoulder. Its wizened sun-dried owner, the bar's mamasan, slid three uncapped, chilled bottles on to the table quickly followed by three tiny china cups which appeared to contain whisky.

"What's this?" he asked Ned.

"Ba Mia Ba. The local beer. It's not too bad. The cups are Saigon teas. It's cold, weak tea. You've got to buy it for the sheilas or they'll piss off. That's how they make their bread. The more they drink, the more money they make.

"How much?"

"Fifty pee for the beer and fifty pee for the tea."

"Fifty pee for that piss-farting little cup of cold tea! You've got to be joking!"

"You're paying for a bit of company too, old mate."

He was, too, he realised. His bird was running her hands all over him, his face, his chest, arms, her fingers going through his hair while she cooed unintelligibly in his right ear. He looked at her closely in the murky light for the first time and was pleasantly surprised. While not beautiful, she certainly appeared passable beneath a modicum of make-up. She wore a western style white mini-skirt which barely covered her crutch. Her brown legs were bare. A flimsy peach blouse and black bra hid only the nipples of her small but firm, shapely breasts. She was smiling sweetly with her white, perfect teeth and black, hungry eyes.

Donkey sought refuge in the beer. It had a strange, sickly, tangy taste. It

was just drinkable. But at least it was cold.

"You buy me Saigon tea," his girl demanded. Donkey hadn't noticed her drink the first one but another was in front of her before he could reach for his wallet.

"What do you reckon," grinned Ned. "All right, eh!"

Donkey wasn't quite sure about that. He was feeling distinctly uncomfortable, not sure that he could handle all this. After his girl had stung him for four Saigon teas in as many minutes, he decided he'd had enough.

"No," he said. "No bloody more. A bloke will go broke at this rate."

The girl pleaded and cajoled, kissing and cuddling him, pressing her tits into his chest, just below his chin. Donkey looked down at the white mounds and drooled. Suddenly he jumped. "Christ almighty, she's playing with me old fella! Bugger off!" he squeaked, twisting out of the girl's grip. Ned, on the other side of the table, was fully aware of what was going on. And he was pissing himself laughing.

The girl took no notice of Donkey, squirming back on to his chest. Donkey was helpless. The girl wouldn't take no for an answer.

"What do I do?" he pleaded with the cackling Ned.

"She doesn't understand. She's probably never met a newie yet that she can't bleed dry. If you don't want to buy any more teas, tell her to didi mau."

"Didi what?"

"Didi mau. It means bugger off."

"Didi mau," said Donkey to the girl.

"You buy me Saigon tea," countered the girl.

"No! I said didi mau," insisted Donkey, quietly.

"You buy me Saigon tea," repeated the girl.

Ned collapsed on to the table, his head in his hands, sobbing with laughter. Harding, quite happily being ripped off by his girl, wasn't far from a state of total collapse either.

"Didi fucking mau!" shouted Donkey, suddenly angry, shoving the girl away, "and you can stick your fucking Saigon teas up your arse!"

Now the girl understood. Her eyes blazed as she leapt from the bench. "Uc Dai Loi numbah fucking teeenn!" she screeched and stormed off. Within ten seconds she had her claws into another victim, an American, and sweetly, seductively, she began to empty his wallet.

"Thank Christ for that!" sighed Donkey. He looked at his mates who were still hooting, wiping tears from their eyes. "And what's so fucking funny ya

bastards!"

They each drank six of the small bottles of beer in the bar. Donkey's refusal to buy Saigon teas for any of the subsequent girls who tried him on meant that he was soon left alone. His *Numbah Tenn!* reputation spread very quickly among the bargirls. Not so Ned and Harding. Donkey noticed that their hands were more in their wallets than around their bottles.

And all around him the scene was the same. A few other Australians, but mostly Americans, getting drunker by the minute, either on the local beer or American whisky or beer for which they paid a small fortune and of which the bar seemed to have an unlimited supply. They were cuddling and being cuddled, kissing and being kissed, groping and being groped. Everybody seemed to be having a ball. Donkey could only sit and watch in amazement.

Only two booths away from their own, Sam Smiley was trying desperately to get both hands and his head down the cleavage of a very large and none too pretty girl. She kept pushing him off just at the point where he looked as though he might succeed. "You buy me Saigon tea!" she would snap at him and Sam would just whimper in frustration and dive into his wallet again.

That small but very profitable gesture would be enough to convince the girl that she and SS were bosom buddies once more and she would allow SS to move in again for the thrill. And just when triumph seemed but a lick away the girl would push him off again.

"You buy me tea!"

SS bought again. And again. And again. And while his groping became more frantic, his achievement was negligible.

At 47 years of age SS was still a single man. He was not particularly attractive to women, in fact he repelled them. He had joined the Army straight from school and had known nothing else. Broken veins in a scarlet countenance attested to his love of a drink over the years. There really hadn’t been much else to do. His hazel eyes were large, bulbous, swivelling suspiciously like a chameleon’s beneath incongruously bushy red and grey eyebrows. He was bald, but refused to accept it. He grew his hair long on one side and swept it grandly right across his shining, freckled cranium to curl around his right ear. He hated wind and was grateful Army life required him to wear a hat a lot. His nose was beginning to look like a pitted beetroot and he continually had little white flecks of saliva in the corners of his mouth. He had a strange habit of sticking his tongue out in the corner of his mouth, biting down on it gently and then repeating the procedure in the opposite

corner. He had no idea he did this. Booze had distended his stomach into a substantial paunch so that when he walked he wobbled from side to side on his short legs, like an overweight great grandmother with dicky knees.

With the curfew time of eight o'clock rapidly approaching, there was a distinct change in the order of battle around the bar. It was nookie time, the time to bargain and buy for jig-a-jig for the remainder of the night. The girls always had the upper hand because both Australian and American troops were not allowed to take Vietnamese into their billets. The girls, therefore, controlled the bedding ground and thus the bargaining.

SS had been making offers since seven fifteen and his bargirl had succeeded in forcing him to raise his offer to thirty dollars and she still hadn't agreed. The going rate was twenty five. Sam was getting exceedingly frustrated as the time crept closer to eight o'clock. He worried that he would have to get the girl to agree soon or he might not have time to get to her place, wherever that might be. He made one final offer.

"All right, thirty five dollars and not a fucking cent more!" That swung the deal. The girl smiled and thrust her right breast into his mouth. His tongue hungrily sought her nipple, briefly, tantalisingly flicking it, albeit through dress and bra, before the girl pulled herself away again.

"You pay now!" she demanded.

SS scrambled frantically for his wallet and pulled out the last of his MPC. His mouth was suddenly filled with soft cloth-covered breast again. He moaned softly and so did she. Her hands slid slowly down his shirt to his crotch and she began stroking him.

"No, wait!" he tried to say but his mouth was choked by mammary muscle. She was an expert. Within thirty seconds Sam's own muscle had stained his pants.

"Shit!" he gasped when the girl let him go. "Why the fuck did you do that?"

"Okay, okay," the girl tried to reassure him, kissing him tenderly on the mouth. "You wait. I change. We go." She untangled herself, grabbed her bag and walked to the back of the bar, disappearing behind a curtain. She kept going, out the back door, and home.

At five to eight SS finally realised he'd been dudded yet again. All he'd got for his thirty five dollars was another quick wank. He whimpered in frustration. He looked at his empty wallet. There had been fifty five bucks in there when he'd walked into the bar and that fuckin' bitch had skun him for

the lot. And the worst part was that it wasn't the first time it had happened. Three months in the country and he still hadn't buried the bone. He hoped nobody had noticed, they'd give him buggery if they had.

There was nothing for it but to join the sprint from the bar only five minutes before the curfew was due to come down. He headed off to the sergeants mess, trying to hide the tell-tale stain on the front of his trousers behind his beret, while Donkey, Harding, Ned and a couple of other Australian ORs raced off towards the Canberra, stumbling in a couple of minutes late.

Ned puffed up to the bar and bought three cans of VB. He collapsed into an armchair and he and Harding compared notes on their conquests. Their hilarity was such that Donkey couldn't help joining in. It had, indeed, been a night to remember.

"Did you see poor old SS?" Ned said. "Ripped off again. It happens to him all the time, the poor dumb bastard. He hasn't woken up yet that the girls have got a conspiracy going against him. Fanny told me. They take it in turns. First they strip his wallet then his old fella. And did you see his strides?As far as we know he hasn't dipped the wick since he's been in country."

"He ought to take himself in hand. It'd be a hell of a lot cheaper," Harding suggested.

Two more cans each and they were pissed. Arms around one another for support, singing raucously, they headed for the stairs and their rooms. They did the Foster's three-step up the stairs — one step forward, two steps back.

"Put another Buddha in,
In the Buddha burning bin,
Light a match and throw it in,
Burn 'im, burn 'im, burn 'im."

Donkey opened the door to his room and stood swaying, steadying himself before attempting to cross the threshold.

"You're drunk!" accused the Padre.

"An' pissed as well," grinned Donkey, collapsing on to his bed.

"Do you realise," sniffed the Padre, "that now you've got the job in PR we'll not only be living together but working together as well?"

In his fogged state, Donkey was momentarily stunned. Hey, he's right, he thought, finally coming to grips with the significance of the Padre's statement. He's the bloody PR clerk!

"Hey Padre, yer right y'know. How about that! Working together as well as

living together. Ah well, can't have everything." Donkey raised himself slowly from his bed and leaned on one elbow, grinning evilly. "Hey Padre, giveuzakizz!"

"You're drunk and disgusting!"

"Yeah, them too." Donkey fell back on his back giggling and closed his eyes.

"Forgive them Father . . ." the Padre began muttering.

Donkey opened one eye. The Padre was on his knees beside his bed.

". . . for they know not what they do."

"Wrong Padre," cackled Donkey, closing his eye. "I know 'xactly what I do. I get pissed as fart."

Donkey rolled over — and his lights went out.

CHAPTER 11

When Nickoli first heard that Donkey was to be moved to PR, he thought all his Christmases had come at once. He was a bit puzzled by this punishment but what the hell, Donkey was out of his hair. He could get back to running the office the way he wanted.

Sure, he was disappointed that Donkey hadn't been court martialled — after all, he was a spy or something wasn't he? But it didn't really matter. Honor had been restored. And he was going to make damn sure everybody knew about it.

So when Brigadier Bradshaw called him into his office and shut the door, Nickoli expected to be heartily congratulated and recommended for promotion to the rank of sergeant.

Instead he was told there was no evidence whatsoever to substantiate his claims, that Corporal Errington had been amazed by and vehemently denied any knowledge of his story.

"Furthermore, corporal," the brigadier said, "it seems you have been going out of your way over the past month to make things as difficult as you can for Private Simpson. I abhor the pulling of rank, corporal; I abhor jackmanship; I abhor selfishness and I do not like people who are not prepared to work as part of a team. And now, it seems, I’m faced with a pack of amazing allegations and lies!

"Private Simpson is not leaving this office as a form of punishment or down-grading, as I imagine you believe, but because he wants to work in PR where he's obviously better qualified. He wants to work on their team.

"Now, let me warn you corporal. Unless you change your attitude drastically I'll be forced to re-assign you to the typing pool and unless there's a vacant corporal's position down there that could also mean a loss of rank. And corporal, if I hear one more miserable word of your fanciful story I'll have you court-martialled. Understood?"

"S-sir."

"Dismissed."

Nickoli was white. He turned and slunk from the brigadier's office in shock. Never in his wildest imagination had he envisaged such humiliation

from the man he adored. What had he done? Where had he gone wrong? All he had tried to do was serve his brigadier to the best of his ability. The mouse on his top lip trembled. I've been humiliated again, he snivelled, and again it's all bloody Simpson's fault!

"I'll get that bastard," he sobbed into his typewriter, "if it's the last thing I ever do!"

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The late monsoon season swept in with a vengeance, flooding streets and knocking out power supplies soon after the heavenly taps were turned on with amazing regularity at around 0300 hours each day.

Air conditioned offices became sweltering hot boxes, letters had to be written at night by candlepower — and guard duties, which Donkey now copped after moving to PR —became a wet pain in the arse at least once a week.

After the VC had been pushed out of Saigon, days off were re-introduced and Donkey, Errington and Harding spent one of those wandering around Cholon taking pictures of what was left of buildings, cars and streets in areas which had been occupied by the VC and blasted by both sides. It was complete devastation. All that was left in some areas were the broken brick remnants of a few walls and piles of rubbish and filth. Some of the bigger buildings had huge holes blasted in them, others had completely caved in. Here and there a few people scavenged through the rubble trying to salvage something from the mess.

"Poor bastards," muttered Errington as he aimed his camera at a young mother with a crying baby on her hip. She totally ignored the baby as she scrabbled through broken bricks, in search of hope.

"You've got to feel sorry for the poor buggers, I suppose," Donkey agreed. "It's always the poor, the little fella, who gets the rough end of the pineapple, isn't it. Ever noticed that? Now you take Jilly, for instance. Do you know where she was during the offensive? Down in bloody Vung Tau on the beach! Would you believe that? Her family's got the odd piastre or two apparently and a holiday villa down there. So as soon as the shit starts hitting the fan here, they pack up the Peugeot and piss off to the beach! It's a lovely war for some fuckin' people, eh!"

"How do you know that?" Harding asked.

"She's got a desk next to me now, you dickhead. Remember?"

"Yeah, of course. No wonder you wanted to swap jobs with me, you bloody perv. I wouldn't mind getting into her pants.

Errington snorted. "Join the queue and then ask Two-Bob if he'd mind if you shafted his piece of ass."

"She's Two-Bob's sheila is she?"

"He seems to think she is."

Donkey was startled by this piece of news. "She doesn't seem so keen on him," he sniffed.

"I didn't say she was keen on him. Maybe she just wants to keep her job."

"It's funny you should say that, actually. Two-Bob pops in a dozen times a day, saying he needs her to do this or that. For the first couple of days she'd trot off with him but I've watched her become more and more reluctant to do so over the latter half of the week. In fact yesterday she told him she was too busy and he'd have to come back later. He got furious with her and ordered her to report to his office as soon as she had finished what she was doing for Colonel Drake. The fact is she was doing sweet fuck-all."

"How did Two-Bob cop that?" Errington asked.

"He was back in five minutes gushing all over, saying he was sorry, he didn't mean to yell, squirm, squirm," Donkey said.

"What a fuckin' worm," snarled Harding. I wonder if he is sticking it to her?"

"You know, I wouldn't mind taking her off him if he is, just to watch him bleed," Donkey said.

"Ten bucks you can't."

Donkey turned to Harding and thought for a moment. He grinned. "Now that's an offer that deserves consideration."

"No! Wait a minute, what am I saying? I'm interested in this piece of pussy too, man. Twenty says I get in before you."

Harding was serious. Donkey wasn't all that sure. He backed off. "Nah, I'm not really interested to be honest. I'm engaged."

"Shit, you gotta be kiddin' me! What's that got to do with anything? I'm married! And me missus is five thousand fuckin' miles away!"

"Yeah, but you're an arse'ole."

"Twenty bucks?"

Donkey agreed, but he really didn't have his heart in it. It was true, the lady did intrigue him, even more so now that he'd had the past week to talk to her and get to know her better. It was just that there was Allison at home . . .

“What about you Charlie, you wanna be in this too?”

Charlie had worked with Jilly for a couple of months now and really had no interest in her at all. She had teased him, tested him, a month or so back but soon realised it wasn’t going to work so she concentrated on building a platonic working relationship with him. Now that Natasha was on the scene, there was absolutely no chance of Charlie accepting the bet.

Natasha . . . what an amazing first night, he recalled. She was an absolute wild thing, a tiger. And by dawn he was in love.

As he stared at the devastation around him, he thought of the things he and Natasha had talked about that night between love making. The sadness in her soul at the wreckage of her country; the mental state of her people, the despair. Was it his own Asian heritage or just plain compassion which made him share her sorrow? And they had talked about politics, democracy and communism, hope and hopelessness, love and hate, East and West, North and South. Is freedom so important that so many should die for whoever is left, and those destitute with a legacy of perpetual pain in their souls? He had slipped in a few questions about General Dong and Jilly, and felt a little guilty about doing so, but Natasha didn’t have the answers he wanted anyway. She didn’t know them well enough yet. Dong, she said, was “hokaay” but there was little enthusiasm in her voice.

The woman with the child stumbled on broken bricks, her battered coolie’s hat slipping to the ground. Her sharp curse brought him back to the present, and with it a mood of despair, suffocatingly thick in the humid air, as though it was part of its chemical composition, threatened to crush him. He tried to shake it off. “No mate, not me. I reckon I can do a whole lot better than that, and cheaper too!” Instantly Errington regretted saying that. Why did he try to hide his real feelings, why did he have to cheapen it, joke about it? Maybe even deny his heritage?

“Right Donk, it’s you and me,” Harding announced.

An old mamasan hobbled past them on a homemade crutch of splintered wood, her left foot swathed in a bandage clotted with dried blood and dirt. Her wide black pyjama pants were torn and caked in mud, flapping in the breeze, buttons missing from the front of her white top so that her sagged and long-spent wrinkled breasts hung lifeless in an aged, oversize bra waiting for the rest of the body to join them in death. She had left her mind at home, wherever that now was, if it existed at all, because her face was completely devoid of expression. No joy, happiness, pain, despair, anger or sorrow.

Nothing. The spirit had departed the mortal body and soul. But only Errington noticed.

Harding thought the scene would make a great picture, turned and ran back in front of the woman, preserving her purgatory in celluloid. “Say cheese mamasan,” he chortled, camera up to his eye.

Errington exploded. “Fucking shit Whiz, haven’t you got any compassion, any respect at all? That woman is somebody’s grandmother, a human being, remember what they are?”

“Car-mon mate, she’s only a fucking Nog for Christ’s sake!” Harding retorted.

“And just what is that?” Errington hissed. “Something lower than dogshit? Is that what you think? You amaze me Whiz. You’ve been in the country five minutes and already you think Vietnamese are something less than human. I can understand — but never condone — that attitude from blokes who have been here six months or more but not from you.”

“Shit, don’t bite me fuckin’ head off! All I did was take a photo.”

Errington sighed, cooling down. Getting angry was so bloody pointless. “I’m sorry, but fair dinkum, it sickens me the way we treat the Vietnamese, the way we continually shit on them. Just have a good look at that woman and imagine she’s your grandmother, your mother even. She may have lost her family, maybe everything she owned. Maybe those rags she’s wearing are all she’s got left in life. Come on, put your mum in her situation, how would you feel then?

“I can’t.”

“You can’t or you won’t?”

“Look Charlie, they are different to us, no matter what you try to pretend . . .”

“Of course they’re *different.* But not lesser human beings. They’ve been belted around by war for a couple of hundred years. How do you think you would come up after that? *Of course* they don’t understand freedom, they’ve never had it. *Of course* they appear to be indifferent, *of course* some of them try to rip us off. They’re not trying to make a big buck, they’re just trying to *survive!* Why don’t we make an effort to try to understand them better?”

Donkey bought into the argument. “I think when we first come over here we all do Charlie, but from what people tell me, I mean fellas who have been here a long time, it soon becomes pretty evident that the Noggies couldn’t give a shit about us or their country or anything, so I suppose that’s where the

antipathy starts."

Errington sighed. "A basic lack of understanding, on both sides."

"It's their country, mate, not mine so why should I worry if they don't," Harding said.

Errington shook his head in despair. He was to have many similar conversations and arguments during his tour of duty in Vietnam with his fellow soldiers, Australian, Kiwi and Septics, and he would be ridiculed for being a Noggie Lover in every one.

By the time they returned to the Canberra they had taken about three rolls of film each. Donkey had found it disturbing, even fascinating, despite the human misery which surrounded him. He was developing a thick skin, the plight of the peasants bothering him less and less.

And it was great to get away from the Padre for a couple of hours. Now he had to put up with him day and night and it was driving him crazy. He avoided his room, spending more time at the bar, watching movies, or playing pontoon with Ned and his cronies.

He found that the PR people went out to lunch as often as they could, usually to an American hotel dining room or restaurant. The food was reasonably good and most importantly, cheap. He joined them, enjoying their company. They were his kind of people — except for the Padre, of course, but at least on these occasions Donkey had the satisfaction of seeing him verbally crucified by the rest of the team every time he attempted to quote from the tablets of stone.

It was during one of these lunches that Donkey came up with his brainwave. The previous day he had seen it in the Cholon PX and now he cursed himself. It had taken him 24 hours to wake up to its potential. If the other blokes would go along with it, it would be brilliant. He raised the matter cautiously that night during the card game.

"This beer's bloody warm," he complained, holding up his can of Reschs DA.

"Surely you don't call this shit from New South Wales *beer* do you," said Ned, dealing the cards deftly.

"It's better than that mud you bloody croweaters brew," chipped in Bob "Whiz" Harding, who had earned his nickname after taking over Donkey's job as the general's "whizkid".

"None of youse southern bastards know how to brew a good drop," countered Myxo, a Queenslander. "Now you take Fourex, mother's milk that

is."

"Anything's better than this New South Wales shit," Donkey pontificated. "It's the same every time we get a shipment. The Foster's is the first to go, then the VB, then the Melbourne, then Fourex and last and always last this New South Wales crap. Thank God there's a new shipment coming in in three days' time."

"If you blokes reckon it's so bloody awful, why do you drink it?"

"Cozthere's nothin' else left, Whiz, you bloody wacker. You bloody New South Welshmen give me the shits. You won't even drink your own piss. You're first in the queue when a new shipment comes in, and what do you buy? Victorian piss, that's what! Why don't you drink your own rubbish? I'll tell you why — because it's shit and you blokes know it! And then when there's no good piss left, just this bloody DA, it's all right for you blokes, you're used to drinking this rubbish. But what about us? We either have to go on the wagon or jump on the top shelf, like Myxo here, and drink rum and Coke."

"It's not real crash-hot without ice either," commented Myxo, holding his glass up to the light with his bandaged left arm to try to find the mysterious source of heat which was buggering up his drink. The bullet which Myxo had caught on the roof of the Canberra had only caused a flesh wound and it was healing well. "Not quite good enough to get you sent home, I'm afraid," the doctor had told him. Myxo was exceedingly disappointed. The one, fantastic, compensating factor for the wound was, he had thought, a freedom bird straight home to Brisbane. He threatened the doctor with a dose of his ten-eighty. "But you don't cook in our mess," the alarmed doctor pointed out. "Not a problem," Myxo had warned. Unfortunately this had not been sufficient to frighten the doctor into submission and he had refused to sign Myxo's ticket to ride. But he did watch very carefully what he ate for the next week.

"Bloody jackmen, New South Welshmen, the whole bloody lot of them," said Ned.

"Aw, come off it youse blokes, it's not that bad."

"I'll tell you how bad it is mate," sniffed Myxo, "Ned can't even sell it to the Septics. And you know how piss-weak their beer is."

"All this arguing doesn't solve the problem that in this heat we can't keep the damn stuff cold," said Donkey. "Come on Ned, it's your deal. Get those cards moving. And I'm sick and bloody tired of running up and down three

flights of stairs to the bar and back every time we want to replenish supplies."

"Eh, I've just had a brilliant thought," enthused Ned. "Why don't we buy a fridge between us? One of those mini-fridge things . . ."

"My thoughts exactly," said Donkey. "You took the words right out of my mouth. If we had a fridge we could stick it here in Ned's room — it's the biggest — and every time a shipment comes in we could each buy a carton of good piss and store them here. Then when the good stuff runs out — which also seems to be a week before a fresh shipment — we'll be all set to tide us over. And we'll have the added bonus of always having cold cans. What do you reckon?"

"It sounds a great idea to me," said Myxo.

"Yeah, I'll be in that," agreed Whiz. "We could even keep some tucker in there for emergencies."

"It's a beer fridge, you dickhead," snarled Ned.

"Come off it, we could probably get four dozen cans and some food as well in one of those fridges."

"I wonder what they cost?" said Ned.

"I'm way ahead of you blokes," said Donkey. "I saw them for eighty bucks in the PX the other day. That's where I got the idea. Twenty bucks each."

"Hey, that's not too bad at all. And when one of us goes home we can sell our share to somebody else. In the end it will cost us bugger-all."

"And what we could also do, initially, is pay say ten cents a can to create a bank for further supplies. So what you drink you pay for."

"We might even make a profit selling cold cans to other blokes when the bar's shut for, say, fifteen cents a can."

"No, bugger that," countered Myxo. "If we're going to buy a fridge let's keep it for our own use. Otherwise every man and his dog will want to get in on the act and we'll have no cold piss for ourselves."

The others saw his point and agreed, although Ned was reluctant to let such a great business opportunity pass.

"Listen Hymie," barked Myxo, "you're making a bloody fivetune selling kangaroo feathers and God only knows what else to the Septics, aren't you ever satisfied?"

"Ehhheee Ahhhh! De biziness is de bizinzz! My mamma, she tella me, neva let a quid float by!" They laughed.

"Right. We'll go down to the PX tomorrow and buy a fridge. And I've got pontoon. Pass over the bank, Hymie, you tight-fisted little bastard," grinned

Myxo.

"So have I," said Ned, turning over an ace to match his king. "I keep it." Myxo groaned. "That's it, I'm goin' to bed."

"Me too," echoed Whiz.

"It's a dose of me ten-eighty for you for breakfast in the morning Hymie," threatened Myxo.

"Aw come on youse blokes, you're not girlin' it are ya?"

It was too late. They were gone.

***

When Mai Li Chen overheard Donkey telling Errington about the nuclear missiles in the hangar at Tan Son Nhut airport, her ears burned. It was priceless information which she immediately knew could be used by Hanoi. And she was amazed that she didn't have to do nothing to get it. Sleeping with Major Swanker had revealed snippets of valuable information as did sneaking looks at the SITREP when she got a chance (which wasn't anywhere near as often as she would have liked) but nothing like this. This would put her in the top rank of spies. It might even warrant personal acknowledgment from Ho Chi Minh, the great leader, himself.

She had realised the risk in passing the information on, the risk that the Americans and Australians might trace the leak back to her. But she thought that acceptable, in light of its importance. If she was caught, *sin loi*. If not, she would continue her Mata Hari role, even though she was still relatively new to it. She was no beauty in the western style, she knew that, but what she lacked there she more than made up for in other ways, in eastern intrigue. In bed she could make a man sing any tune she wanted. Well, Major Swanker anyway, and he had been her first real test.

The information had been a tactical coup of immense proportions. Every time she read a newspaper, Vietnamese or the American *Stars and Stripes*, she saw President Nixon and Kissinger squirming and revelled in what she had done.

When she was moved from the Intelligence office to PR she really feared the worst and worried that every day brought accusation very much closer. She spent the first few days at her new desk beside Donkey Simpson unsure of herself. They're setting me up, she surmised, removing me from access to classified information. But as the days passed and nothing happened her

confidence began to grow again. There didn't appear to be any suspicion attached to her at all. And despite being removed from Intelligence, she still had a potentially excellent source of information sitting right next to her all day every day. True, he wasn't with the general any more but part of his job was liaison between the general's office and PR. And he was a personal friend of the general's new secretary. He would have to come across first class information.

And he was a much more attractive man than Major Two-Bob, no question there. There was something about him, too, which really turned her on, something she couldn't put her finger on, a presence, or power which attracted her like a magnet. She determined to find what it was, and suspected she would enjoy herself immensely in so doing. Swanker, she knew, was not popular at all with the Australian general. He was a damn fool and his time had come. He was now a nuisance, forever trying to get her out of the PR office and into his own so he could pull her head down into his trousers. Animal! He even insisted she unzip them with her teeth. And when he came back to the flat, the things he made her do! No, she decided, she didn't need him any more. In fact she was probably better off being a couple of steps back from access to classified information, from Swanker, because it removed her from primary suspicion in the event of further "leaks". Yes, it was time for him to pay!

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Armed with $20 each in Uncle Sam's Military Payment Certificates, the four soldiers On Her Majesty's Australian Service in South Vietnam headed off for the American PX to buy a fridge. They walked the mile to the American services bus stop outside the Capitol Hotel and propped, waiting. They were immediately besieged by shoe-shine boys all clamoring for attention.

"Didi mau! Bugger off!" Ned waved them away. But these boys never took no for an answer.

"Numbah Wahn job Uc Dai Loi!" they sang in a cacophony of disharmony.

Donkey looked down at his shoes. They were pretty grubby, he thought, and the boys did do a good job. While he stood waiting for the bus it wouldn't hurt him to part with fifty pee.

"How much?" he asked one of the more persistent boys.

"Fifty pee. Numbah Wahn job Uc Dai Loi."

Donkey motioned the boy to work. He put his left foot on the boy's shoe-shine box and the nuggeted hands went swiftly to work. When he had finished Donkey's left shoe shone brilliantly.

"Number One job." Donkey smiled at the boy who was beaming broadly from his squatting position at Donkey's feet. He put his right foot on the boy's box. Suddenly the boy's expression changed.

"Hund-led pee!" he demanded.

"What?"

"Hund-led pee! Numbah Wahn job," he said pointing to Donkey's right shoe, dull and dirty, and then his left shoe, clean and bright.

"Hey!" Donkey turned to his mates. "The little bastard is trying to blackmail me!" He turned back to the boy. "No hundred pee, you said fifty pee, fifty pee!"

"Hund-led pee!" persisted the boy.

"You little bastard. I'll wring your fucking neck! Fifty pee. No more!"

The boy let go a stream of invective in his native tongue, adding "Uc Dai Loi Numbah flucking ten!" just to make sure Donkey got his message. He put the lid on his nugget tin, pulled his box from under Donkey's right foot, packed up his brushes and rags and walked away, slinging back snatches of abuse as he went.

Donkey couldn't believe it. The little bastard wasn't going to give in. He'd rather lose his promised fifty pee than back down.

"I'll give you sixty pee, you little bastard!" Donkey shouted after him.

"Hund-led pee!" the boy spat back.

"No hund-led — *shit* — hundred pee. You say fifty pee. Do my other shoe you little prick!"

"No hund-led pee, no shoeshine!"

Donkey looked down. It looked as though he was wearing odd shoes. He could hardly believe the boy's impudence. Ever since he had been dragged into the Army he had felt like a football, being kicked from pillar to post by every bastard who crossed his path but never scoring a goal. Every bastard had and still was using him as they pleased. He felt as though he had no say whatsoever in his own life. And here was a stinking little snotty-nosed Noggie kid having a boot at him as well! Shit, he thought, the boys outside their own hotel were more than happy to be paid fifty pee for a shoeshine.

"It's the damn Yanks and their easy-come, easy-go money," observed Ned, grinning broadly at Donkey's predicament. "They bugger things up for

everybody. Even these little kids take them for a ride."

"That doesn't get my right shoe shined," sniffed Donkey. "What the bloody hell do I do now?"

"Just walk away as if you don't give a bugger. He'll come back."

Donkey waved his arm in dismissal at the boy and did as Ned suggested.

The boy scampered after him. "Niney pee!"

"Didi mau," said Donkey.

"Uc Dai Loi! Niney pee!" He was strident, insistent.

"Sixty pee, no more."

"Eighty pee!" Sullen, angry.

"Hey Donkey, I don't know how much longer the bus is going to be but you'd better not let this bargaining go on too long," warned Whiz.

"Yeah, right. All right you little bastard, eighty pee."

The boy grinned broadly and went back to work, triumphant in victory.

"I suppose you've got to admire the tenacity of the little bastards," Donkey said grudgingly as they boarded the bus for the PX. "But I still would have loved to kick the little prick fair up the arse."

At the PX the four split up to search out small items each had to buy first. Donkey was searching for some washing powder for his maid when he was approached by a tall, blond, crew-cutted American in baggy greens.

"Hey man, ken you tell me where the shoes are around here?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Donkey, "I just walked past them in that last aisle." He pointed in the general area where he had seen the shoe display.

"Hey man, you Orstraylien?" queried the American with some amazement, gazing intently at the "Australia" badges in shiny mock brass on each of Donkey's shoulders.

"Yes," replied Donkey, wondering whether the Septic could read or whether he had taken a reasonable stab in the dark.

"You speak English better than them Thailanders, man. Thanks, man!" He waved cheerily and swaggered off in search of his shoes.

Donkey was speechless. *Better than them Thailanders?* And suddenly he became very angry. *Who do these fucking Americans think they are! What appalling ignorance!*

"It's that sort of illiterate stupidity which makes the Nogs hate them so much," observed Myxo after Donkey had told the other three about the incident.

"World Series baseball," chipped in Ned.

"What?"

"World Series baseball. That's the mentality of the Septics."

"Still don't know what you're talking about," said Myxo.

"They've got this national baseball competition and they call it the World Series. But it's not, of course. There's no teams outside the good ol' US of A which compete in it and yet they have the gall to call it a world series. That's Septic thinking for you. The world according to the Gospel of Abe Lincoln consists only of the USA. Nobody else exists. Or if they do, they don't matter. Haven't you heard the Yanks here saying they can't wait to get back to The World? What they mean by that is America mate. America is *the* world. Nothing else exists."

"The Fourth of July and apple pie," said Donkey.

"Rarrrt onnn, mannnn."

"It's not as though they treat the rest of the world like shit — in their own way they're very friendly — it's just that they don't know it exists. They're quite happy in their blissful ignorance."

"Talkin' of bliss," chipped in Myxo, "it rhymes with piss — and that reminds me of the fridge."

"I wish I'd met that bloke," said Ned wistfully.

"Why?" asked Donkey.

"He would have been a prime candidate for kangaroo feathers."

"Hymie!" the others yelled in unison.

In its cardboard box filled with polystyrene packing, the fridge stood five feet tall by two and a half wide by three feet deep. It was bigger than they had thought.

"Now how the hell do we get it home?" wondered Donkey. Nobody had thought of that.

"It would be hopeless trying to lug it on to a crowded bus, and anyway, we'd still have to carry it from the Capitol to the Canberra." Ned walked round and round the fridge, scratching his head.

"We've got to find some sort of transport. We can't cart the bloody thing for three miles." Myxo was scratching his head too.

"It's too big for a taxi." Whiz stared at the fridge quizzically.

"Shit. We should have organised Tiny to get a Land Rover from Transport. He would have done it for a couple of cans."

"Yeah. Too bloody late to think of that now, Donkey, you dumb bastard. It was your idea to buy the bloody thing. You come up with an idea to get it

home.

"I wonder if it would fit on a kamikaze?"

"Hey, that's not a bad idea," said Ned. "Let's give it a whirl."

The kamikazes, or cyclos, were a sort of three-wheeled motorbike back to front. They were made in two pieces. The driver sat over the motor and rear (driving) wheel and this constituted the back half of the crazy machine. The front section was a chair for one person — like a barber's chair — stuck between two front wheels. The two pieces were joined by a swivelling arrangement similar to the front fork on a bicycle. Across the back of the chair was a bar which the driver used to steer the vehicle, simply by pushing right or left on the bar, depending on the direction he wished to turn.

The terrifying aspect of these cyclos was that the chair was very low to the road and as your feet stuck out in front of you, they would act as the vehicle's bumper bar in a nose-to-tail collision. And because the vehicle in front might be only two feet away, they were terrifying things in which to ride unless very drunk. Hence the name kamikaze.

Ned whistled one down from their allocated parking bay well away from the front of the heavily guarded PX. The fridge fitted clumsily with its base on the footrest and its back leaning back against the front edge of the seat.

"That's not real crash-hot," said Donkey, rocking the fridge back and forth. "It's too unstable."

"Right," said Myxo, scratching his chin, "you'll have to jump on too, Donkey, and hang on to the bloody thing. We'll follow you in a taxi."

"Hey, hang on . . ."

"It was your idea to buy the thing, your idea to put it on the kamikaze. Just think of the cold cans!" he said, fleeing with the other two for the taxi rank, leaving Donkey to ponder his plight. "Why me! Why is it always fucking me!" he yelled after them.

He tried squirming behind the fridge so he could sit down on the seat and wrap his legs and arms around it. His rifle kept getting in the way and no matter how he tried, it just didn't work that way. He jumped off the kamikaze and studied the problem.

There was only one way it would work. He climbed back on board the kamikaze, facing the puzzled driver, his feet planted on the footrest either side of the fridge. He leaned forward, half laying over the top of the fridge, and grasped the driver's steering bar with both hands, his body steadying and protecting the fridge beautifully.

"Let's go!" he barked at the alarmed driver and away went the kamikaze, Donkey's arse first, out into the wilds of Saigon traffic, Donkey and the driver pushing and pulling against each other on the steering bar.

Looking through the grinning haze of the driver's foul betel nut breath, only inches from his face, Donkey could see his mates in a cab behind him. They were hanging out of the little Renault's windows pissing themselves laughing. Donkey failed to see any humor in the situation at all. He was hanging on grimly as the stiff-springed kamikaze bounced and rattled over the rough Cholon streets.

"Hey man, look at that Goddamned crazy Arzzie!" Donkey heard the shout but couldn't see where it had come from. But after they'd travelled another twenty yards, he could see and was mortified. They'd just passed the Capitol Hotel and its adjacent bus stop and there were about twenty Septics milling around outside. When they saw the kamikaze heading down the street arse-first they almost fell over with laughter.

"I suppose it must look rather funny though, Donkey considered. And he grinned. Then he chortled. Laughed.

"Whooppeee!" he yelled at the Americans.

"Go man go!" they screamed back.

Donkey took one hand off the steering arm and waved extravagantly — and almost fell off. He quickly regained his grip, tears of mirth now beginning to blur his vision. He looked back at his mates still following close behind in their cab. Their heads were no longer out the windows. He could see they were doubled up with laughter.

"Youse bastards!" he screamed.

As he approached the Canberra Donkey looked precariously over his right shoulder and saw three or four blokes on the third floor balcony idly staring down at the traffic below.

"Whooppee!" he yelled. They saw him and began pointing. "Right!" he indicated to his driver, "go past and around the road plantation again. We'll give these bastards a show."

Despite his now aching arms and the backs of his legs cramping, Donkey was determined that if he was going to be cast as the clown in this comedy, he'd do the job properly. The kamikaze driver went past the Canberra to the end of the block. Donkey made him stop. He gingerly straightened his back, undid his belt and slid his trousers and underpants down around his ankles. Resuming his former position, he told the driver to turn around the road

plantation and do another lap.

By this time there were twenty blokes lining the third floor balcony, cheering and whistling. Donkey risked another wave.

"Ride 'em Donkey!"

The guards in the pillboxes out the front of the building couldn't believe their eyes as Donkey's brown-eye loomed larger and larger as it approached them. Hearing the racket the guard sergeant rushed from the hotel expecting trouble — and stopped dead in his tracks in disbelief.

Donkey went round again, waving in triumph as more and more soldiers lined the balcony or poured out of the hotel to see what all the fuss was about. Whiz, Myxo and Ned, by this time, had pulled up in front of the hotel. They were leaning against the shop front next door hardly able to stand, tears streaming down their faces.

Donkey finally pulled up in front of the hotel. His arm and leg muscles were so stiff and tight that he fell off the kamikaze on to the road. That was greeted by an enormous cheer.

"Right youse bastards!" barked Donkey to his three companions as he retrieved his trousers, "your turn! Get the bloody thing upstairs!"

The fridge worked like a charm. They played cards for the rest of the afternoon and night, through gales of laughter, collapsing into bed finally, pissed out of their minds. Dead cans were everywhere.

The story of Donkey, "The Kamikaze Kid", had already become a legend. They were calling it the greatest ride since the Man from Snowy River chased the colt from Old Regret.

CHAPTER 12

The man beside her stirred momentarily and snorted before settling back to sleep, but it was enough to wake her. She stared at him, moonlight filtering through the tree outside the open window, casting shadows shifting across his form under the white silk sheet, changing shapes, so that one minute you see him, the next you don't. The chameleon. Perhaps that should be his codename, she brooded.

He was a small man, even in a land of small people. But he was fat, unfit, where his countrymen were generally thin, wiry. A soldier who had the best of everything, wanted for nothing, except one thing, ultimate power. And that was something which, in the opinion of Cowboy Cassidy, the CIA shouldn't countenance for him just yet.

It had made one bad mistake already in its manipulation of Vietnamese politics. The CIA had allowed the Circle of Generals to overthrow the regime of President Diem way back in 1963 because it had run out of patience with the blatant corruption of his regime. After a period of musical chairs and damaging instability, Langley, through the American ambassador in Saigon, banged together the heads of two of the generals, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu and Air Vice Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, tied strings to their hands and feet and sent them out to rule the country. Thieu converted from Buddhism to Catholocism to get the ruling Chinese business vote and ran for president in the phony elections on which the Americans had insisted while Ky buttressed the ticket with the powerful military faction by running for vice president. They were the only candidates. The Americans hoped the alliance might put some steel and spirit into the troops of the south. Thieu, they knew, was an accomplished politician and they banked on his deviousness to keep things under control at the political level whereas Ky was a hawk, a cowboy, a military strategist of some considerable ability who was respected by his fellow southern generals who, in turn, also knew that the counter-balanced Thieu and Ky would respect their "business activities", mainly the smuggling of heroin, which was making them immensely rich. Thieu was smart enough to know that while they were busy making money, the generals wouldn't be interested in a coup against him. The only condition he put on them was that they fight the odd battle or two in support of the Americans.

The Americans turned a blind eye to the graft, the corruption and the drug trade but even with increasingly large daily injections of American greenbacks and Green Berets, the war was not going well. Thieu and Ky had begun trying to run things their way, for God's sake, instead of the American way, the *right* way, and both were building enormous Swiss bank accounts based largely on the dollars of American business, just like Diem had done, for the day when their time would come as they knew it inevitably must. So much for their commitment to the cause of their country. But unlike Diem, they were also determined to get out before bullets got them. What they failed to see, what their corruption had blinded them to, was the growing American frustration with them; they had forgotten the lessons of 1963.

So when Cowboy Cassidy first got wind of Dong's ambitions to oust Vice President Ky, his immediate reaction was one of interest but he recommended cautiously to Langley that they stick to the devil they knew for the time being while he assessed this new guy.

Cassidy knew Dong's reputation as a great soldier far outweighed his ability. The South Vietnamese and American publicity machines had hailed him the Hero of Hue after he'd thrown the North Vietnamese out of that most northern city of the South, just below the DMZ, during the infamous Tet Offensive. What was left unheralded was that it was Dong, as commander of Hue's defences, who had lost the city in the first place. He'd been caught with his pants down by the North Vietnamese who had overrun the city in just a few days. His loss of face was substantial. But Dong's army, largely with the help of American GIs, regained control in a few weeks of fierce street-by-street fighting. The American Command gave Dong the credit in a PR exercise designed to boost dangerously low morale in the ranks of Ky's armies, not to mention that of the people, who needed a hero, needed their faith in their leadership and its muscle restored, at least to the point of hope if not exactly faith. Dong's "reward" was another star — from one to two — and transfer to command of Bien Hoa province, with Saigon at its centre. He was not a member of Thieu's inner cabinet of ruling warlords; indeed while they were all involved in the drug trade in one form or another, he was a smuggler of cinnamon. But the Saigon party circuit welcomed him as a hero and he quickly came to believe his own publicity, his burgeoning ego and burning desire to add heroin to his business making him mis-read the signals.

It was at one of those parties that he introduced Natasha to Cassidy. Since arriving in Saigon he had quickly worked out that he couldn't go anywhere

without the American's support. Cassidy immediately and openly lusted after her, as Dong had suspected he would and he quickly arranged for her to work as a liaison officer between the two of them, based mainly in Cassidy's offices just down the hall from his own in the Free World building. Of course, it meant some personal loss but business was business. He reasoned that once Natasha had the big, brash American by the balls, so too would he. Hell, for the loss of a little pussy, it would be worth it. Her instructions from Dong were clear — find out what the CIA was thinking and get Cassidy on-side.

Natasha had her own ambitions, too, very simple ones. It had taken Cassidy two weeks to seduce his new liaison officer. She drove him crazy teasing and titillating him with exaggerated coyness until he was delirious with desire. When she had finally succumbed, after he had promised her what she wanted, as he rutted wildly on top of her, she gently fondled his scrotum which fitted neatly into the palm of one small, delicate hand. Dong's task had not fazed her at all. At just twenty two there had never been a man who had bettered her, and there had been plenty of men. Hunger had taught her how to survive in the dog-eat-dog world of the streets of war-torn Saigon. She was the eldest of her mother's five children, and from an early age had shared the responsibility of feeding the family. She became streetwise very quickly, working the bars. Her beauty ensured she was always in demand, and her pimp charged more and more for her services until he realised she was far and away better — and smarter — than his other girls. He made the mistake of trying to sell her into Saigon society, into the circle of the generals, for an extravagant amount of money. They took her with pleasure, and shot him as a VC, which he may well have been although they never bothered to find out. *Sin Loi*. She soon came to the attention of President Diem who quickly recognised her potential and ordered her into training, in the arts of seducer, soldier, spy. She graduated with honors.

Then her patron had been toppled. Only her beauty and the skills she had learned saved her from the subsequent purge and yet still she was humiliated, raped again and again and cast aside eventually like a broken toy. When Dong came to Saigon he was startled by her beauty and picked her up as a concubine. It wasn't long before he realised she was much more useful to him than that. He was quite taken by her intelligence, her knowledge of South Vietnamese politics, its people of power and their idiosyncrasies. She also had a surprising knowledge of America and wanted to learn so much more.

He put her back into uniform and Cassidy had taken the bait.

She had been extremely grateful to the little Vietnamese general for pulling her back from the depths of despair and it took little effort to get her life story. He learned she had a deep hatred of the north for what they had done to her father and now she had a passionate fire of revenge against Ky's cronies. Her loyalty to him was unquestioned, in his view, cemented by his rescuing her and subsequent kindness, albeit for his own purposes.

She held back just one secret from him, her impossible dream. She dared not tell him about her American fantasy. She dreamed it constantly, imagination whisking her to a Disneyland of peace, tranquility, happiness. It began during her bargirl days when her GI clients had educated her about this Mecca, and she worshipped the wonderful promises it held.

Cassidy soon discovered he was mating with a tigress. She shredded him, drained his power, the very fire which drove him, and yet, like a heroin fix, he had to have more. And she asked so many questions! He had suspected from the first that Dong had planted her on him and saw now the opportunity to turn her around. He simply promised that she and her family would not only see America, but "live there for the rest of your lives." In return, she had to tell him what General Dong was up to.

Natasha was overjoyed. Here was a way out! Fantasia turning to Tomorrowland. The days of acute hunger for her family had passed but still she felt insecure, without future, for there were still very real dangers. How could she work for two men? And survive? She clung to her dream of America, determined to do anything to realise it.

Dong had hinted very broadly that one day he would lead South Vietnam, if that's what the people wanted, he had added with phony modesty, but there had been nothing more. She was positive he was planning a coup, had overheard things, the general talking to his officers, little snippets of phone conversations, secret meetings, but there was no blueprint, no documents, no timetable. And Cassidy had hinted very broadly in their boudoir conversations that the US was less than enamoured with the south's current leadership and wondered whether there was anyone better around.

Natasha turned on to her back in the huge bed and studied the ceiling. Again the shadows settled, shimmering, until a gust of breeze would panic them, dissolving, reforming, the chameleon melting into the greyness.

And then there was Charlie. Immediately she felt her face flush. Why should she feel ashamed? She had never had this strange feeling before she

met Charlie. What was he doing to her? She daren't think. Suddenly Charlie had complicated everything. He was just so beautiful, an Adonis in a sea of seething, hissing snakes, untouched. Before, nothing mattered except one thing — getting her family to the safety, the security of America. She had been, still was, she repeated to herself, prepared to do anything to achieve that dream. Cassidy had given her that chance, had promised, and she had grabbed it and wasn't letting it go.

The sleeper snorted again, startling her, but his breathing settled. She turned away gently, careful not to wake him, her bare back becoming exposed. A breeze caught her between the shoulders, on the spine, and she shivered involuntarily. *Where am I now?* she thought. *So many masters! So much danger!* And now there was Charlie, threatening everything she was working for. For just one undisciplined moment, she dared to wonder if Australia could be as good as America.

***

Apart from writing captions, Donkey filled in his days by helping the two photographers in the darkroom. He was learning something new which he enjoyed —and doing it in comfort. The 68 degree Fahrenheit temperature in the air conditioned room was a blessed relief from the highly humid 91 degrees outside.

Donkey would take the prints back to the office, write and duplicate the captions, tape them to the prints and post them back home to the metropolitan and local papers as well as magazines such as *Australasian Post* which always gave them a good run.

He found his duties required that he get an Army driving licence. That, he thought, would be the ultimate challenge — learning to drive a right-hand drive vehicle on the right side of the road in this crazy city. Only that morning the bus from the Canberra had been caught in a traffic jam that extended the normal ten-minute trip into forty-five.

Cars, buses, taxis, trucks, cyclos and motorbikes were jammed up for miles on end. It was amusing at first, seeing vehicles of all descriptions driving on the wrong side of the road until they came head to head in a dead stop. Then the sticky heat took over and amusement turned to exasperation.

"These fucking Nogs have got less intelligence than ants," observed 'Juice' Lemon, strap hanging next to Donkey.

Then there were the power failures — for days on end. Without power films could not be processed and that left the photographic team with little to

do but write letters or sit around doing nothing. And it wasn't difficult to do nothing. Such was the oppressiveness of the heat that everybody in the Free World building was continually saturated with sweat. They looked as though they had put on clothes straight from a washing machine. A fresh, dry shirt of a morning was saturated inside five minutes in the monsoon season. Donkey used the power failure time to catch up on his letter writing, particularly to Allison.

"Our new boss (Lieutenant Colonel Cyril Pace) arrived today and he seems all right but it's a bit early to judge yet. I was rather pleased when Colonel Drake introduced me as "Private Simpson, who is our corporal caption writer." It will be awhile yet though, unfortunately, before I'm promoted.

"We went to a sort of press party last night but it was pretty dull until we started a two-up game and showed the Yanks how to play. And then they skun us alive! There were about six US Army blokes there and five journos, one a young blonde girl with an equally blonde moustache. Afraid I wasn't attracted to her at all but she was a roundeye which is unusual in this God-forsaken place.

"It's raining here at the moment and has been for most of the afternoon. Just before lunch as I left the darkroom (which is way over in a corner of the compound) I felt a few spots of rain. Then the whole sky fell on top of me. By the time I had run one hundred yards to shelter I was completely drenched. But the humidity dried me out in about half an hour.

"We had a concert party from Australia at the Free World two days ago. Yvonne Barrett (in a bikini covered with a full-length gown-pantaloon, white lace, see-through creation) and Pat Carroll (in a wonderfully short mini-skirt) were the big attractions with Johnny Chester and a few others. The girls (naturally!) put on a great show and were loved by all. It's great when these shows are on but when it's over it's a bit depressing because we start dreaming of home and wish we were there.

"Would you believe I ate an Australian meat pie the other night? One of the blokes who went to Australia on R & R brought back a box of Four n Twenties and I managed to get my hands on one. Although it was stone cold it was still damn good eating! It was certainly a novelty. The bloke who brought them back is a hero! Well, to the fellas who got a pie he is!

"I'm moving into Ned's room in two days when his room-mate goes home — and am I looking forward to getting away from the Padre! It's a bigger room than most of the others and has a balcony which overlooks the

street. One of the good things about it is it faces outwards (most of the other rooms face inwards towards a central atrium) and we can open the door and windows and get a fresh breeze through the room at night. I'll be closer to our fridge too!"

***

Major Two-Bob was in the habit of working back late in his office. He thought it impressed people to be in the office more than 70 hours a week. He always made a point of telling his fellow officers, just in conversation mind you, how many hours he had chalked up the previous week. Nobody gave a rat's arse. In fact it became something of a game with his peers that if Two-Bob said he'd worked 73 hours the previous week, they'd say they had worked 74. All of them. Always one hour more. That was sufficient to ensure Major Two-Bob stayed longer at work the following week and spent less time in their BOQ driving them crazy with shop talk when they were all trying to relax. He never twigged he was being had.

It was 1845 when Major Two-Bob decided to quit for the day, leave a little early to go around to Jilly's. He was tired and depressed, it had been yet another bad day. Maybe it was time to put this spy business to her. That should be good for a laugh and he felt he needed a little levity; a jolly good whipping might be just the thing to lift his flagging spirits.

That decision to leave before 1900, which he very rarely did, saved his life, if nothing else. He was just leaving when the bomb in his office went off and the explosion propelled him out the door like a mighty kick in the pants.

***

When Donkey moved out of the room with the Padre, Harding moved in. Donkey told him he was mad. "He'll have you in orange robes and shavin' your head inside a month," he warned.

Harding acknowledged Donkey's warning but said he couldn't stand rooming with "that snivelling prick Jackman" any longer. The Padre, Harding reasoned, could not possibly be any worse.

"Well make sure you give him a kiss goodnight first up," Ned suggested.

"No way," Donkey warned. "Don't do that. He'll be up all night praying loudly to the Lord to save the poor lost sheep. I know. Been there, suffered that. It's a real no-win situation, believe me."

Harding scratched his chin. "There has to be a way to neutralise the Padre,

but there's no possible way you could nullify the Jackman. I feel as though I'm moving from Hades to Heaven."

"Heaven's not all it's cracked up to be," Donkey sniffed.

"That's it! Crack! That's what he needs, a good fur-lined crevice! We'll take him out one night and get Fanny to fix him up with a sheila."

"That's just what I reckon he needs," Ned agreed. He turned to Donkey. "I told you that, didn't I. Nothing like a good fuck to put you back on the planet, to get rid of a bit of bad blood."

"You'll never get the Padre within a mile of a bar, you stupid bastards."

"Wanna bet?" challenged Ned.

"Oh shit," sighed Donkey, "here we go again. More trouble."

***

General Earl “Cowboy” Cassidy was holding court to a fawning throng at the court of “King” Ky at yet another Saigon diplomatic circuit cocktail party but his mind was elsewhere. He just wasn’t sure what to do. Ky, there in a corner with his own group of yesmen, was becoming a real problem, trying to tell *him*, the best Goddam military strategist to come out of The World, how the country should be run, how to win the war. Who did the guy think he was? What the hell did he think a vice president could do? Hell, even the president of the greatest country in the world couldn’t fart without the permission of the people. Well, the right people, anyway. No point burdening the populace with decisions of state, no sir, that lesson had been learned a long time ago.

Now here, in this country, there was no point burdening anyone with any responsibility for the future because the Company had everything under control. Well, it would have if the damn politicians back home could shut up for a couple of months.

And the press. *Gard-damn!* Freedom of the press would kill America one day, interfering fools. Here we are trying to bring democracy to this shit-heap country and we’re copping a caning for it, from our own press! Man, something needs to be done about some of those people. Why can’t they see we’re achieving democracy for these Vietnamese, freedom man, something they’ve never had.

Sure, it’s sad they don’t know what it’s all about, sad that they have reservations, but Uncle Sam knows best. Hell, we been there done that, why don’t they understand that sometimes?

He was only saying to Big Al the other day, “Al, don’t doubt Uncle Sam’s

determination, our resolve: damn Commies'll kill this country if we let 'em, every last man, woman and child, yes sir. We gunna give these people freedom, democracy, the right to live just like Americans, the whole Goddam package, even if we have to kill every one of 'em to achieve it." Yes sir. Just a little more pain to get the gain.

And Thieu and Ky were losing that plot. It was only a matter of time before they'd have to go. But was Dong the answer? Did he understand that Uncle Sam had the best interests of the country at heart? He smiled wryly as he swirled his Jack Daniels. Maybe he did. When he'd hinted very broadly that he wouldn't mind a piece of that Natasha broad, Dong has responded very quickly, like a man with the right attitude.

It was a great shame, General Dong thought as he laughed heartily at a Cassidy joke along with his circle of sychophants, that he had to depend on this buffoon to help him achieve his ambitions. He knew Cassidy was weighing him up, Natasha had gleaned that much, but could he win him around? Could Natasha "persuade" him that Dong was the "puppet" he wanted, needed? As he enthusiastically refilled the big American's glass, he reviewed his position. He had, as the Americans were fond of saying, all bases covered in his ambition to lead the Vietnamese people out of the wilderness; to give them their freedom, democracy (or whatever), no matter what the cost. That was immaterial. People were of no consequence, there to be used to achieve the end result, that's what mattered. Yes, Natasha (as she called herself in these westernised times) had the Americans covered and Jilly was proving a bonus with the information she had extracted on operational matters from the Australians.

He was on very good terms with himself. There was nothing major that he could see in his way. Now it was all a matter of time — and timing. Patience. He laughed heartily at another Cassidy joke that he didn't understand and allowed his gaze to drift across to the vice president and his audience in the corner. Enjoy it while you can, my friend, he mused.

CHAPTER 13

After four months in country, Donkey's war had become routine, boring. There was nothing much left in Saigon to entertain the tourist in him. He had taken hundreds of photos of every noble and ignoble thing in the city. Home was still a million miles away; he still had eight months to serve. They were the realities in a world of unreality. The transparent *que sera, sera*attitude of the Vietnamese was beginning to foster within him a feeling of deep cynicism. He began to question whether the country — the people — were worth fighting for; worth the effort. Everything he did was beginning to seem so bloody pointless and yet he had to keep doing it for another impossible eight months.

He began going out more often, drinking more. He even began buying Saigon teas for bargirls although still he resisted their other offerings. Anything to relieve the daily repetitive grind, to escape the crushing reality of what, like so many before and around him, he was beginning to see as an utterly pointless exercise. Worse, he felt chained into a madness which suffocated and choked. And the more he squirmed the tighter the chains twisted, not so much around the body but in his mind. Of course, he wasn't on his Pat Malone.

"Fuck this," snapped Ned one night as they sat in their room, listlessly drinking beer. They had not long arrived back from the Free World after a day's work and were laying back on their beds, stripped to underpants, staring up at the fan as it buzzed ineffectually, stirring only gently the hot, humid air. "Let's go and see Fabulous Fanny."

"I dunno," murmured Donkey. He wasn't enthusiastic. He didn't have a bargirl and he wondered at that point whether it was worthwhile being chased by one.

"It would be more fun than mooning around here for the rest of the night," Ned sniffed.

"And more bloody expensive too."

"Car mon, get yer arse inta gear."

Donkey sighed. It wasn't such a bad idea to get out of the Canberra. "Look, if we're going to go out, why don't we make a night of it and go to the Capitol

for dinner. Their tucker's much better than ours."

"All right, that's an even better idea. Then we can go and see Fanny later."

They finished their cans, showered quickly, dressed in their summer uniforms, grabbed their rifles and walked to the Capitol along the now familiar sidestreet.

"You know, one of these days we ought to take a different route," Donkey suggested.

"Why?"

"Everybody in the Canberra comes this way every time they go to the Capitol. It would be dead-set easy for a couple of VC to brass us up from one of the shops, a window, a corner. All they'd have to do would be to sit and wait for a mob of blokes to come along. It happens every night."

"You've got Charlie on the brain. There's no VC around here."

"Have a look around you, you stupid prick. Any one of these slanteyes could be a Charlie. How do you know they're not? There's no way of knowing. One minute we could be walking along here cracking jokes and the next we're arse up in the fucking gutter, screaming for help . . . if we're that lucky."

Ned turned to face Donkey. "Shit, you are in a bad way, aren't you. Had a nookie yet?"

"Nah."

"Why not?"

"You fucking well know why not."

"What, that sheila back home? You've got to be joking! You don't really believe she's staying all nice and virginal while you're five thousand fucking miles away do you?"

"I'll smash your smart-arse head in in a minute." Donkey said it without malice. He didn't have the energy to do otherwise.

"Look pal, you've got to get rid of some of that tension, let it all hang out. And what she doesn't know won't hurt her."

"Yeah, maybe you're right." But then he quickly changed his mind. "Nah, it wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be fair."

"Well, it's your business. But you're going to blow up one day old mate, mark my words. Look, it's not as though it's for real, just a fuck, nothing more, nothing less. But it sure as hell gets rid of a lot of bad blood."

"Maybe for you."

"For everybody, pal."

Donkey thought he had him there. "Even the Padre?" He grinned.

"The bloody Padre," Ned groaned resignedly. "Yeah, even the bloody Padre." He sniggered. "Shit, he's built like a stallion, too. Wouldn't the Noggie sheilas love him! They'd go bloody crazy over that enormous weapon! He'd probably get it for free."

Donkey had to laugh. In his mind's eye he saw the Padre's white arse bouncing so hard over a Noggie bird that her deep-set slant eyes went round and bulgy. It tickled his sense of humor.

"Fair dinkum, even the Padre will go troppo over here. Surely you've noticed that he's becoming crazier by the day? Whiz reckons he's started beating the bejesus out of him with his Scriptures already," Ned added.

"I warned him. He wouldn't listen. Reckoned he could handle it."

"Yeah, but Whiz reckons he's laying it on him thicker than treacle just because he told him he had a head job in a bar the other night. Kneeling down by his bed morning and night for over half an hour praying out loud for this poor lost sheep's soul."

"He's always been down on his knees but I must admit he used to keep his prayers to himself."

"There you go. Troppo. What he needs is a good fuck."

"P'raps we could spike his Fanta one night and smuggle in a sheila to give him a head-job."

"Hey, that's not a bad idea! Better than trying to get him out to a bar."

"Yeah, if you want to end up in the brig."

Ned thought for a minute. "I suppose it could be a bit dicey, but I'll mention it to Whiz. Bloody good thought though. Ha! I'd love to do something like that. It'd certainly liven the place up a bit, wouldn't it! Hey, we could even charge admission! Nobody would hesitate about paying ten bucks each to see a Noggie go down on the Padre!"

"Hymie!" Donkey roared in admonishment.

"Gooda biziness," sniffed Ned. "Make great *feelthy* pictures. And I'd win the bet."

"You and your fucking biz-i-nezz."

"Look," Ned pontificated, "we've got to help the poor bastard, one way or another, after all, he is our mate. Either we bring the job to the head or we take the head to the job." He sniggered and grinned broadly.

"You're going to get us into big heap trouble one day pal. And when your balls are in a vice and you're screaming blue-bloody-murder, don't expect me

to come along and extricate you."

"No, I wouldn't, if I knew what the word meant. But I'd sure as hell expect you to get me out of it." Ned grinned.

Donkey laughed. "You're a hopeless, illiterate arse'ole, Ned."

"Ahso, but good-a at de biziness, too, no?"

"Carmon, you little prick, let's go eat California steak." If there's one good thing about the little bastard, Donkey thought, it's his sense of fun. He had certainly brightened Donkey's mood.

***

When they dug Major Two-Bob out from beneath the rubble they thought he was dead. But after they'd dusted him off they found he wasn't that bad at all. He was burned down the back of his head, his back, bum and the backs of his legs, but the doctors could find only two pieces of shrapnel in him, both the size of ten-cent coins, symmetrically placed, one on each cheek of his expansive backside. He was dusted off to the American Field Hospital in Saigon where it was quickly established that his wounds were only superficial. No major damage done but he would carry the shrapnel scars for the rest of his life. As soon as he woke up, bum burning, the first word he said was "Jilly!" He then broke down, sobbing hysterically.

When the bandages came off Major Two-Bob's twin, brown, eye-shaped scars on the cheeks of his hairless pink bottom the nurses immediately rechristened him Major Three-Bob and began singing or humming *"Beautiful, beautiful brown eyes"* and giggling expansively behind their hands of caring.

The very last thing General Melville-Smith had expected in his own headquarters was a bomb and it made him very angry. Maintaining security in and around the Free World complex was terribly difficult. While the Australians occupied most of the building and its surrounding storeyard, other commands such as the Koreans, Thais, Vietnamese and Americans had ground floor offices, all doing their own thing, more or less coming and going as they pleased. The Vietnamese police maintained a 24-hour guard on the main gate and weren’t too fussy who they let in, as long as they wore a uniform or had a handfull of MPC. The Australians had their own guard patrols of a night, but these stuck to the building and its immediate surrounds. And then there was the problem of the common fence with the pagoda. So if the bad guys wanted in, they got in.

The MPs told Big Al that this had been no random VC attack. They said the bomb, a fairly crude device, had been taped on the underside of Major Swanker's desktop. "If the major had been at his desk when it blew, sir, it may not have cut him in half at the waist but it certainly would have taken out the old orchestra stalls and a hell of a lot else besides," the CO of the MPs had observed with a wry grin. "Seems someone didn't like the major, to target him like *that."*

This confirmed the general's suspicions. He'd been told what Swanker had said when he awoke (even though he'd said nothing further) and now the experts were telling him it was a personal attack. No more games, his hand had been forced. He would have to arrest the Vietnamese interpreter on suspicion and see what developed. If in the end that caused some embarrassment, too bad. He could not afford to put his command, his men, in danger.

He was briefing the MPs to find her when an odd delegation, led by General Dong, marched respectfully but briskly into his office. The fat little general was accompanied by two Vietnamese MPs who half-dragged, half frog-marched, a middle aged, toothless, balding man between them. He had been badly beaten and was covered in the dirt of a derelict. He appeared very frightened. The general saluted smartly, American style, snapping his hand away frivolously from his forehead, and began talking quickly, turning to Natasha, who stood slightly behind him. She did not miss a word.

"Good morning general," Natasha translated, "General Dong apologises for visiting your offices unannounced and without invitation this morning but he wishes to speak with you about a very important matter."

"My compliments to the general but as you can see we're rather busy this morning following the bomb attack on our offices last night . . ."

Natasha cut him off. "With respect sir, that is what my general wishes to speak to you about. When he heard about the unfortunate incident my general was deeply distressed and he immediately set about trying to find the person responsible. It is very bad that guests in our country are treated in this way in our own house. But before the general tells you of the progress he has made, he wishes to inquire about the wounds of Major Swanker?"

"Only minor. He'll be out of hospital in a week or so."

"That is good to hear, sir. And now the general wishes to present you with the person responsible for this outrageous attack." She turned to the captive who was thrust forward on his knees at Big Al's feet. "He was found hiding in

the compound with more bombs to put in other offices." She turned back to General Dong who rattled on quickly in Vietnamese. Natasha translated.

"My general says he will deal with the traitor immediately . . ."

"Just hold on a moment. Would you please tell the general that I would like to speak to this man."

Natasha spoke to General Dong, who shook his head.

"General Dong says that is not necessary. He does not wish the general to trouble himself further with this matter. It will be cleared up in an instant. General Dong says he is very embarrassed that this has happened to his dear friends, Uc Da Loi, very sorry about Major Swanker and will send in repair teams to fix the damaged offices this morning. Now, if you will excuse us?"

Before Big Al could reply, the Vietnamese general saluted extravagantly again, turned and ushered the MPs and their captive from the office. Shortly after a single pistol shot cracked the stifling air. Racing to the window of his fifth floor office, Big Al saw General Dong with a pistol in his hand and the bomber laying on the ground at his feet, his brains staining red the surrounding ochre gravel.

He turned to Bradshaw, who was standing beside him. "Don't fool around, do they Paul." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Do you believe that poor bastard planted the bomb?"

"What do you mean sir?"

" Dong wasn't very keen for me to talk to him, was he. I wonder why? And did you get a good look at that poor bloke? He looked like a dero to me, not like a defiant VC."

"A scapegoat, to protect someone else?"

"That's exactly what I'm thinking. Paul, I find it difficult to believe that that pathetic creature was a saboteur."

"That would have to color one's perception of General Dong then, wouldn't it? And add some weight to Errington’s suspicions."

"Absolutely."

"Hmmm."

"I'll tell you what else it's done — taken the heat right off that interpreter he gave us, Jilly. Obviously I can't arrest her now. All very convenient, don't you think?"

"Yes sir, I see your point. It is rather."

"So, where do we go from here? Swanker's in hospital with shrapnel in the arse and a zip on his lip and our suspected spy is still running free."

"We need to think again, a new plan."
"And damn fast, Paul. Damn fast."

***

Ned and Donkey walked into the foyer of the Capitol Hotel and handed in their rifles to what once had probably been the coat-check counter. Now it was an armoury, stacked with M1 "popguns", Armalites, sub-machine guns of several types, Australian SLRs, and hand-guns of all shapes, sizes and makes.

The entire bottom floor of the hotel was a massive restaurant, dimly lit, and weapons were not allowed to be carried to tables. One side was devoted to poker machines which were in constant use, rattling and pinging. A Filipino band on a stage at the rear of the huge hall was doing a reasonable imitation of a Beatles number — if you really used your imagination.

The place was crowded. Ned and Donkey wandered around trying to find a vacant table. It was hopeless but there was one, Donkey noticed, about four rows back from the band with only two GIs seated at it. He motioned Ned towards it.

"You guys mind if we join you?" Donkey asked the two Americans.

"Hell no man, c'mon, sit down! We got a buddy who's gone to get some beers but there's room here."

Donkey was doubtful. The tables were small. "We want to eat. If you guys are eating too it'll be a bit tight."

"No! We've eaten. You guys go ahead, sit down."

"Okay, ta," said Donkey. They sat down and introduced themselves to the two GIs who said they were in Saigon on R & C, down from I Corps at the top of South Vietnam near the Demilitarised Zone, the DMZ. One was pure Apple Pie American, the other the blackest man Donkey had ever seen. They fought together, they said, they were buddies, and they were delighted to meet Donkey and Ned, the first Australians they had ever met.

When "Apple Pie" mentioned this Donkey saw Ned's eyes light up and his ears twitch. Oh no, he thought, here comes de biziness. Surely he couldn't con these poor innocent bastards. They seemed to Donkey like decent, straight, friendly blokes. To Ned, though, they were prime targets, fat R & C wallets ripe for the plucking.

Apple Pie said his name was Arty and his mate was called Joel although

everybody called him Midnight.

"Cause I's de blackest man in the 'hole worl'," added Midnight proudly. It would have been difficult to argue with him. Arty explained that he, Midnight and Spike, their other buddy who was getting the beers, had all booked to go to Australia on R & R. They didn't know much about the place, he confessed, but they had heard it was "just the greatest, man."

"And everybody speaks 'merican, too, they say," enthused Midnight.

"English," corrected Donkey.

"Yeah man, same-same us. Hey man, I want to see this Sydney town — and that opry house. That's supposed to be really somethin'. Hey, you guys from Sydney?"

"No," said Donkey, "I'm from Melbourne and Ned here is from Adelaide."

"Mel-born? Where's that, man? Ain't never heard of no Mel-born."

"It's further south than Sydney, way down on the south-eastern tip of Australia. Adelaide is a few hundred miles further west."

"You got them kang-gar-roos down there, man?"

"Yep, they're all over Australia."

"I wanna see me a kang-gar-roo when ah goes on R & R. Maybe even buy one an' take 'im home."

Ned saw the opening and plunged in. "You won't be able to do that, old mate. They're a protected species and they're not allowed out of the country."

Ned paused. When he was satisfied the GIs were sufficiently disappointed with this news, he began his sales pitch.

"I'll tell you what though." He paused for effect again, looking around him surreptitiously. "Have you guys ever seen kangaroo feathers?" He studied his would-be victims for any sign that they had been clued up on the classic Aussie con.

"Kangaroo feathers?" said a puzzled Arty.

"Of course not!" Ned rebuked himself. "How could I ask such a question! You haven't even seen a kangaroo!"

He leaned conspiratorially over the table towards the Americans, his voice muted so only his victims could hear him.

"Kangaroos are covered in the most beautiful feathers. Now I told you guys kangaroos are a protected species and that they're not allowed out of the country. Well, the penalty for trying to export even their feathers is so harsh . . ." He rolled his eyes and drew a finger across his throat. The GIs were fascinated. He had them on a string and was playing them like puppets.

Donkey was sitting back desperately trying to suppress a grin.

Ned sat back, leaving the weight of the terrible penalty hanging. He flashed his eyes around the room again before leaning forward to continue his conspiracy.

"I'll tell you guys something because you're good buddies of Donkey and me. I've got some kangaroo feathers that I smuggled out of Australia when I came over to Nam. It was easy. Customs don't worry about blokes in uniform."

"You got some kangaroo feathers, man?" Arty was awed.

"Right here," said Ned, patting his chest.

"Hey man, let's see!"

"Well I dunno," said Ned, looking over both shoulders again.

"C'mon man, ain't nobody here to be scared of."

"Well, I suppose it will be all right this once." With apparent reluctance, Ned began to unbutton his shirt. Carefully he produced six feathers, each about a foot long, variously colored a deep reddish brown, blue, and golden ochre.

Shit, thought Donkey, there's another poor bloody Noggie bantam rooster that's running around Cholon bare arsed.

Every time Ned saw one sporting that luxurious appendage he would pursue it with a zeal born of desperation for a dollar. If he caught the poor rooster — and he usually did — its tail would be plucked in five seconds flat. It was rare, these days, to see a rooster with a tail within a mile of the Canberra. If someone did see one, its whereabouts was immediately reported to Ned. He paid commissions. And whenever a group of blokes were out on the streets and they came across a rooster minus tail feathers, it would immediately be tagged "one of Ned's."

Ned's kangaroo feathers fascinated the rapt GIs. "Hey man," said Arty, "them kangaroos must be some beautiful creatures."

"That's it in a word Arty. Beautiful."

"You wouldn't think of selling them feathers, would ya Ned?"

"Hell no!" gasped Ned, clutching up the feathers carefully and putting them back inside his shirt. "They're my good luck charms. No, I couldn't part with them."

"They good luck charms, man?"

"The best."

"Hey man, I'll give you twenty bucks for one, just one!"

"Nah. Look, I'd like to help you old mate but I really couldn't part with them."

"Forty bucks. For just one, man. Hell, you got six!"

"Yeah, and I've had 'em for a long time. They've stopped me from gettin' shot. What if I sell one to you and I get shot? What then? Not that I suppose I would, if I parted with just one ..."

The American could see Ned wilting, hesitating, and moved in for the kill.

"Fifty bucks, man." He reached for his wallet and counted out fifty dollars on the table. "There. For just one. Hell, I got me nine months to go, man, I don't wanna get shot. Give us just one, man." He was pleading.

Ned eyed the money laying on the table. "You're twistin' my arm right up my back, Arty, but okay. I wouldn't do this for everybody, you must understand, but you are real good buddies of mine and Donkey's . . ."

"Wadd about me man?" It was Midnight. He wanted one too. Ned sighed resignedly. "Okay Midnight, I guess if I give one to Arty I'm duty bound to give you one too. But for Christ's sake!" he suddenly insisted, "don't tell no other bastard about this! If word gets out that I'm givin' away kangaroo feathers I'll be busted and sent back to Australia to spend two years in the brig! I'm only doing this for you guys as a favor. Here." Ned handed over the feathers and scooped up the money Arty and Midnight had placed on the table. "Now stick them in your shirts and don't bring them out until you're back up country. If you do you'll lose them and put me in the shit!"

Donkey was open-mouthed in astonishment and admiration. One hundred bucks for a couple of bantam rooster feathers! The man's unbelievable! And what astonished him even more was the gullibility of the GIs. Out in the boonies they must have seen hundreds of bantams — and yet they hadn't twigged! I'll bet Ned tries to sell them the Opera House and the bloody Harbor Bridge now, thought Donkey.

But he didn't. The other American, Spike, returned with the cans of Budweiser. His mates just couldn't contain themselves, despite Ned's protests. They told Spike all about kangaroo feathers, showed theirs to him. He too had to have one. Ned won another fifty dollars, bemoaning the fact that he had only three feathers left now and his luck would probably be halved. He consoled himself by telling the GIs he had lost the feathers to three worthy causes. They were chuffed to have met such a wonderful "Orstraylien" friend on their first night in Saigon.

Suddenly Arty realised that Spike had taken an awful long time to get three

beers. He had been so taken with Ned's story that he hadn't noticed earlier.

Spike was slim, around six feet with mousy, straggly straight hair and flickering, grey eyes. He drawled through the right corner of his mouth. "Waaal, ah foun' me a guy with some good stuff." He popped a pill into his mouth and washed it down with an enormous swig from his can.

"Ah shit, man, you ain't on the god-damned hard stuff already?" Arty appeared disgusted.

Midnight didn't give a shit. "Hey, can you guys tell us somethin' 'bout Orstraylia?"

"Going to Sydney, aren't you?" asked Ned.

"Yeah man!"

"Well, I'll give you a word of warning. Steer well clear of the koalas."

"Ko-what?"

They're sort of little bears, about two foot high. They look kinda cuddly but don't let that fool you. They're bloody deadly mate."

"Little bears? 'Bout two foot high? Is that all? Man, our grizzly bears stand eight foot high — and an angry grizzly is really bad news."

Midnight's buddies nodded in agreement. "What's so dangerous 'bout bears only two foot high, man?"

"They live in trees. And they're brown and green like your camouflage suits and damn difficult to spot. You can be walking along without a care in the world and suddenly *whamo!* you've got a koala on your back. And within five seconds you're history, fella."

Ned grabbed his beer and raised it to his lips. "Up the old Red Rooster!"

"More bullshit!" spluttered Donkey, unable to contain himself. Midnight's eyes narrowed menacingly. "Heeeyyy, you guys aren't shittin' us are ya?"

Donkey quailed. Shit, he thought, I've blown it. These bastards will take us apart!

Ned jumped in quickly to rescue the situation. "Hey, c'mon, would we bullshit you guys? You're our buddies! Nah. What Donkey said was just an expression we use when we're on the piss."

"On the piss?"

"Yeah, you know, drinkin'. Boozin'. Just like we are now. Every time we get a fresh can we say 'up the old red rooster, down with the bullshit!' because good buddies don't bullshit one another, now do they?"

"No man they don't," warned the dubious American.

"So, up the old red rooster!" Ned raised his can high in salute grinning

broadly. Ned had won them around again. The Americans too raised their cans, upped the old red rooster and swallowed long draughts of the weak American beer.

"Now these koalas," said Ned. "I've told you guys that they jump on your back, right?"

The GIs nodded.

"Well, they've got these long claws you see, a bit like the claws on your grizzly bears, I suppose, which they use to climb around in the trees. But when they jump on you they rake their back claws right down your back, leaving eight great slashes right through to your ribs."

"Hey, no shit?" Spike was fascinated.

"And they wrap their front paws around your neck. Now when you feel your back being opened up like a sardine can you quite naturally arch yourself and throw your head back, like this, right?"

Ned demonstrated. The Americans, nodded, understanding.

"And that's when they slash your throat with their front claws." Ned paused for effect. The GIs were spellbound.

"But our koala isn't finished with you yet. As you're toppling over on to your back, he flips himself on to your stomach and slashes his back claws down from your throat to your balls . . ."

"Holy cow!" breathed Spike.

". . . and then you're history mate. Your guts are hanging out everywhere. Then what they do is dive into your chest cavity, rip out your heart and eat it on the spot, while it's still warm . . ."

"Yeah, but remember," Donkey interrupted, "it has to be still beating. Don't forget that Ned. If it's not beating and pumping blood they won't eat it. They'll just piss off and leave you. Not that that does you much good anyway."

"Sheee-iit!" muttered Arty.

"There is a way to avoid 'em of course," said Ned.

"Hey man, how? Them koalas sound real scary to me."

"You walk along with your eyes on the trees. You see they'll only attack when they've got the element of surprise. If they can see that you have them spotted they won't jump. And if they do and you see them coming, you can jump out of their way. Once they're on the ground they're slow and cumbersome and you can kick the shitter out of them. The only way they can win is to jump out of a tree right on to your back."

"Whooooo, man". Arty breathed out deeply. He had seen himself being ripped open from arsehole to breakfast time while in a friendly country on R & R — something Charlie had been unable to do with all his tricks in the past three months. He was relieved that there was some way to protect yourself from this vicious two-foot high monster. And he felt grateful to Donkey and Ned for warning him about it. So too did his buddies.

"Yeah Ned, that's right," commented Donkey with a word of caution. "But don't forget if you walk around like that, with your eyes in the trees, you're liable to be attacked by a goanna."

"A go-hannah? What's that man?"

"It's a sort of alligator, I suppose. That's the closest thing that you'd have to a goanna. But they're not as big. They only grow to about six feet long. They're a browny color to camouflage them on the ground. Their skin is a lot smoother than an alligator's but it's got a sort of sandpapery texture."

Donkey picked up his can, sending a telepathic signal to Ned. Over to you old mate, mooorrreee bullshit!

Ned picked up his drift. "They've got legs like an alligator though and they can run like the wind. I've seen them run a hundred yards in even time and then shinny up a one hundred foot gum tree in the same time."

"Run up a tree?" Midnight's eyes were shining with fascination. The pupils in Spike's eyes were dilating. The LSD was beginning to have its effect.

"Yep, they're unbelievable tree climbers. They live in the trees by day and come down to ground at night to feed. They don't live in water like alligators. They hate the stuff, except to drink, of course."

"Hoooeeee!" gasped Arty.

"Their teeth aren't very big though Donkey, are they." Over to you old China, while I refresh the bullshit thinktank.

"No, but they're serrated and as sharp as razors," warned Donkey. "What happens is this: while you're wandering along with your nose in the air looking for koalas you don't see the goanna creeping up in front of you along the ground until you hear his final charge. You've only got a split second to see those teeth and his red forked tongue slashing in and out of his mouth . . ."

"Forked tongue?"

"Yeah, just like a snake's it is, only broad and flat. And it flashes in and out of the goanna's mouth at terrifying speed. They reckon the flashing of the tongue holds the goanna's victims spellbound until it can latch on to your

balls."

"Balls?"

Ned took over again. "That's right. They go straight for your town halls. A quick, jerking rip with those serrated teeth and you're minus your manhood, ol' buddy."

The three GIs squirmed. They were stunned. The greatest fear of any soldier is to step on a mine and be parted from his privates. They weren't all that sure now that going to Sydney for R & R was such a good idea.

Their wide-eyed contemplation was shattered by a shout from a nearby poker machine.

"Hey, you bloody bewdy! Jackpot!" It was one of the drivers from the Australian Transport Section. Donkey had noticed him earlier, by himself, feeding coin after coin into the machine and lazily tugging the handle. This time it had paid off with a one hundred dollar jackpot.

Ned jumped up and homed in on his new target who he only knew as Gregarious, who worked in Sigs but Ned was about to befriend him. He reasoned the guy ought to be good for a couple of beers, at least.

Ned ushered Gregarious to the bar and was rewarded with a can. He brought him back to the table they were sharing with the GIs just as another buddy of Ned and Donkey's GI friends approached the table also. There was a party on in one of the rooms upstairs, he said, and everyone was invited. Ned said he'd be in that like a shot and Gregarious, who had a reputation as a loner, strangely agreed. It was only then that Donkey noticed Gregarious was fairly pissed.

Donkey wasn't so sure about the party. "Shit, Ned, we haven't eaten yet and we've been here more than two hours!" And then he went white. "Christ! Look at the time!" It was 2030. The curfew had come down at 2000. "Jesus, what do we do now! We're out after curfew!"

"We go to the party," said Ned.

"But for Christ's sake! How do we get back home!" Donkey was frantic.

"We don't," intoned Ned. He wasn't in the least worried. "At least not until morning. Go and get a couple of hamburgers for us before they shut the kitchen. You'd better get one for Gregarious too. I think he might need it."

Donkey was stunned. It had been a bloody fun night, taking the piss out of these Septics but Ned was taking things too far now! Surely, he thought, there had to be a way to get back to the Canberra, back home, safe and sound. He'd never spent a night away from the place apart from the nights on guard at the

General's house. But this was different. They were stepping into the unknown here. He sat transfixed while the GIs around him made arrangements to get the booze for the party. The four of them headed off to the bar to buy beer, Kentucky whisky, bourbon, Coke, Southern Comfort. They came back armed with bottles. It was going to be a top shelf party. The grunts from the boonies are really gonna blow their minds tonight, thought Ned.

"Hey, c'mon you guys!" yelled Arty to the three Australians.

"Yeah, be with you in a minute. We're just going to get a hamburger. What room's the party?"

"Four oh eight, fourth floor. Make sure you guys come now."

"Donkey!" hissed Ned. "Go and get those fucking hamburgers will you!"

Donkey snapped back into the present.

"Look," Ned tried to reason, "we can't go back to the Canberra now, you dickhead. There's transit rooms in this place, all we have to do is find one after the party and crash here for the night. No sweat. Right Gregarious?"

Gregarious grinned crookedly. "I done it a hundred times. I get caught up with the pokies and don't notice the time goin' so I stay here and wander home in the mornin'. No sweat Donkey. No bastard even knows you're gone."

Donkey didn't trust Ned one little bit, but Gregarious was a different matter. And he could see now there wasn't really any choice.

"Okay," he said resignedly, "but for Christ's sake Ned, no more playin' funny buggers. If those blokes find out about those bloody chook feathers we'll have our heads smashed in."

"Donkey, you're right for a change. Okay, no funny buggers. These Septics look as though they're going to have one hell of a party so we'd better leave before the going gets rough — which it probably will. And whatever you do, don't drink anything but beer — and from the can."

"Why?"

"You'll see. Now for Christ's sake, will you get those bloody hamburgers!"

The Filipino band had moved on to the Rolling Stones. They could get No Satisfaction, they sang, and nor could they give it. There was no hooting from the audience though, Donkey noted as he ate slowly through his hamburger. In fact every eye in the place was riveted to the stage, willing the bouncing breasts of the girl singing to escape their flimsy bonds. It didn't happen. Just when it seemed as though it might, when the very edge of her nipples began peeping into the extravagant V of her bra-dress, the song would end, the girl would bow slowly and lowly, titillating, using her half moons to best effect.

That, at least, got some reaction from the lethargic audience: a cacophony of wolf whistles and animal growls.

She would then turn her back to the all-male crowd, flick her shoulders and pop her most outstanding talents back into place. Who cares if she can't sing, Donkey thought, with tits like that she doesn't have to.

Donkey, Ned and Gregarious picked up their rifles from the armoury before it shut for the night and went up to the party. It was in full swing. There were about twenty guys in a four-bed room, swaying and swinging, while the Beatles were blowing their minds.

"Now listen," Ned hissed to both Donkey and Gregarious, "only beer! And don't accept an opened can. I've got a church key, use that. And keep your fingers over the holes when you're not drinking."

"Why, for Christ's sake?"

"Donkey, you want a newspaper taxi appearing on your shore in the morning?"

"What?"

"Look around, you dumb bastard, look around!"

"LSD?"

"And every other thing you can fucking well imagine."

"Shit. I don't like this. Let's go find that room now, or go back down to the bar."

"Yeah, we will. Soon. But I've got unfinished business."

"Shit! You promised no funny buggers!"

"This isn't funny buggers, it's business!"

"Oh, Jesus help us . . ."

Midnight had noticed them at the door of the room. "Hey you guys, Arrzies, c'mon in, join the party! Grab a beer!"

"Hey Midnight, how are ya man!" Ned was back in his salesman's suit.

"Hey you guys!" screamed Midnight, "I want y'all ta meet . . ." He was drowned out by the music. He loped over to the record player and flipped the needle arm off the record. *Lucy in the sky* . . . no diamonds this time, baby.

The swaying, swinging, eye-rolling figures stopped suddenly and turned towards the record player to see who the prick was who had interrupted their mind blow-job. In that split-second of silence, before they could scream their objections, Midnight cut in.

"Hey you guys! I want y'all to meet some Arrzies."

Heads turned towards the door where Midnight was pointing. "That guy

there on the left is Donkey, middle is Ned and right is Greg."

"Gregarious," corrected Ned. Midnight ignored him.

"An' hey you guys, jus' look at this!"

Good on you Midnight, thought Ned jubilantly, I knew I could depend on you.

Midnight stealthily produced his feather from beneath his shirt. "Ned here, he gimme this here kangaroo feather! An' it's jest about the best lucky charm a man could have. Better'n a rabbit's foot! Right, Ned ol' buddy?"

His audience was impressed.

Ned played distraught. "Shit, Midnight, I told you to keep that a bloody secret until you went back up to I Corps! Now you've buggered everything!"

"Hey no man! These guys all my buddies. We'se all in the one unit, man. Ain't no squealers here!"

Ned sighed inwardly with relief. He'd counted on just that. He realised that what he was trying on was a huge gamble, but he had figured the rewards could well be worth it.

"Yeah, well I hope so Midnight, 'cause if I go down ol' buddy, you go with me."

"Hey Ned, you got any more o' them thar roo feathers?" It was a stranger. His first customer. Midnight answered for him. "Jus' three!"

Ned was swamped with offers. He backed off under a sea of waving dollar bills, using the same reluctant sales routine he'd used on his earlier suckers. And he hooked a dozen of them.

He finally relented, agreeing to sell only two. The first one went in the subsequent auction ("it's the only fair way to give everybody a chance", Ned told them) for seventy dollars, the second eighty. One by one the buyers had dropped off as the price had risen. When Ned's fist fell on the second feather, he had an inkling there were still two underbidders who might — with a little encouragement — be pushed higher if there was another feather around.

"Ah hell, I feel sorry for you two guys," he confessed to his two underbidding targets. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I suppose I can always get my sister to smuggle me over some more feathers. So I'll give up my last one, the one I love most of all . . ."

"One hunert dollars!" shouted the taller of the targets. Ned looked to the other. He shook his head forlornly.

"You got it!" Ned announced to the winner, handing over the feather and pocketing the hundred dollars.

Donkey looked on in absolute amazement. Bloody Ned will be a millionaire before he gets home the way he's suckering these Septics, he thought. Three hundred and ninety dollars for six bloody chook feathers! He couldn't believe the cheek of the little bastard; or the gullibility of the Yanks.

But it didn't end there. Ned carried on, selling his slouch hat for another thirty dollars, his boots for seventy five. The Americans loved Australian boots. They were all leather with metal toecaps and plates in their soles. The US standard issue boots were nothing more than military issue sneakers which gave no protection at all compared to the solid yet light and supple Aussie boot. His imitation brass "Australia" shoulder tabs went for ten dollars each.

Donkey added up the night's takings. *Takings.* Ha! he thought. How bloody appropriate! Five hundred and thirty five bloody dollars!

Ned mixed with the Americans joking and laughing for about five minutes longer, slowly sidling over to Donkey who was talking to another group.

"Give it five then we're buggering off," he whispered in Donkey's ear.

Donkey couldn't understand Ned's timing. The party was just beginning to swing along, he was feeling pleasantly pissed and his earlier fears had been erased by the friendliness of the GIs. They were great guys. He told Ned so.

"Do I have to explain everything to you, you dumb bastard!" Ned was agitated. He sighed with exasperation and cooled quickly. "Look, see that joker talking to Spike?"

"Yeah."

"Well he doesn't belong to the same unit as these guys. He's a stranger. He's on his last night of R & C here and he's broke. He's trying to bum stuff off Spike who won't budge 'cause the guy's got no dough. And the bummer is getting more desperate by the minute. I reckon he hasn't had a hit all day and he's about ready to bust wide open. When he does, old mate, we better not be here!"

"How the hell do you know that?" Donkey could not see how Ned had seen this while he was so busy with his auction.

"In de bizinezz, mate, you learn to see trouble before it sees you."

Donkey shook his head dumbly and looked around for Gregarious. Ned rejoined his group for more laughs and jokes. After five minutes, Ned gave Donkey the nod. Donkey disappeared through the door, waiting up the corridor. Two minutes later Gregarious appeared.

"Hey, what's goin' on? Ned told me to go out and look for you."

"Ned reckons there's a bad scene comin' up in there mate, and we don't want to be around when it does."

"He's gotta be kidding! Those guys? They're all right."

"That's what I thought, but believe you me, Ned knows better. And you've got a hundred bucks on you haven't you? You wanna get rolled?"

"Hell no!"

"Then just do as Ned tells you, for Christ's sake."

As Ned left the room, begging off to go for a leak, Jimi Hendrix was doing his thing for the party, hoping everyone enjoyed their ride.

"Loved it!" chuckled Ned, patting the thick wad of notes in his pocket. He ushered his two chortling companions down the corridor. "Now let's find a bed."

At the end of the corridor there was a TRANSIT sign on one door. The room was used by troops passing through Saigon overnight. Ned pushed the door open and they went in. Five of the six beds were occupied by snoring figures surrounded by gear.

"Shit! Only one left," whispered Ned.

"That'll do me," said Gregarious. "You and Donkey can look elsewhere." He grinned triumphantly, sitting down heavily on the bed.

"I don't think that's a very good idea. We should all stick together," Ned whispered.

"Nah, she'll be right. I told you, I've done this a hundred times. Piss off and find your own beds!"

"Okay, if that's what you want, but for Christ's sake, keep one eye open all night or you're liable to get your throat cut."

Donkey thought Ned was being overly melodramatic. "These blokes here won't give him any trouble. They've obviously had their bellyfull early."

"Yeah, true, but there's so many spaced out bastards in this hotel — particularly at that party — that you never know what might happen. Keep that eye open Gregarious."

"Okay, I'll do that. I'll meet you blokes out the front in the morning."

"Six o'clock. As soon as the curfew lifts. Okay?"

"Right," slurred Gregarious. He sounded as though he'd had a bit more to drink than they had realised.

Ned and Donkey found two beds in another transit room on the third floor. They lay on them fully clothed, their rifles beside them. "Two hours on, two off, Donk," whispered Ned. "I'll take the first." With five hundred and thirty

five dollars in his kick, Ned wasn't taking any chances.

"Right mate. Wake me up." Donkey went to sleep almost instantly.

Gregarious' first mistake was to take his clothes off. It was hot in the hotel and he figured he'd be more comfortable in just his jocks. He lay his clothes on the end of his bed. Just as a precaution, he cocked his rifle, putting a round up the spout, and laid it down on the floor beside the bed within easy reach. "Now let some bastard try and knock me over," he smirked brashly. He tried desperately to keep an eye open, as Ned had advised, but the booze won. He fell asleep within fifteen minutes.

The desperado who had been trying to bum a hit off Spike at the party had seen Gregarious slip away and his befuddled brain began to work overtime. He was desperate for a fix, or money to buy one. He had seen Gregarious pull off the jackpot earlier in the night. There was his hit. An easy one hundred bucks, or what was left of it. Enough to romance *Lucy*. He crawled across the floor of the room and peeked around the door jamb just as the three Australians had gone into the transit room at the end of the corridor and he had watched until Ned and Donkey had come out soon after, disappearing down the stairs.

Perfect. He couldn't have hoped for better. The Arzzie would be all alone, an easy hit. All he had to do was endure the cramping in his guts for about half an hour and then he'd move in.

He crawled back into the party and grabbed a can of beer, drinking it quickly. Nobody took any notice of him. He began to shiver and shake, his withdrawal pain gripping tighter and tighter. He opened another can of beer. Twenty minutes had passed. It was enough! It had to be enough! He crawled out of the room, getting to his feet only when he was in the corridor.

The door to the transit room was open. Directly across the room from him he saw an Australian slouch hat on the end of a bed. That's him! Down on his hands and knees again, he crawled over. More luck! The guy's taken his clothes off! This will be easy! He grabbed at Gregarious' trousers, feeling for his wallet. His hands were shaking violently.

In his drunkenessGregarious had forgotten one basic rule — put your wallet under your pillow, between the cheeks of your arse, anywhere. But never leave it in your trouser hip pocket.

The junkie felt the wallet and snatched at the pocket, fumbling. His shaking hands just wouldn't work. As his clumsy fingers ripped and tore at the trousers, the wallet fell free on to Gregarious' left foot. He jumped. The

junkie grabbed the wallet and, twisting on his knees, began a fast but clumsy crab-like crawl back to the door.

"What the . . .??" Startled awake, it took Gregarious a few seconds to realise what was going on. "My wallet!" He exploded into instant anger, automatically grabbing his rifle from the floor beside him and springing from the bed. He saw a shadow scrambling across the floor towards the door.

"You thieving bastard!" he screamed. "Stop or I'll blow your fucking head off!"

The shadow didn't stop. In panic, it jumped to its feet and rushed to the door. Gregarious scrambled after it. The junkie flew through the door, pulling it shut after him. Gregarious lunged for the closing gap with his rifle, just managing to find it with the barrel before the door slammed against it, knocking the rifle violently sideways in Gregarious' grip.

An enormous explosion ripped through the confines of the hotel room and corridor, shattering every dream in every bed. Gregarious hadn't even realised that he had flicked the safety off, that he had his finger on the trigger. Both had been automatic reactions, training. The explosion was still ringing in his ears when Gregarious heard a dull thud out in the corridor.

The door bounced back off the rifle, slowly. In the corridor's dim light, Gregarious could see the junkie sitting against the opposite wall, still.

What's he doing sitting there? Gregarious wondered, dazed.

The roar of the rifle discharge had shot every one of the sleeping guys in the transit rooms out of their beds and on to the floor. Standard Operating Procedure with incoming artillery. They looked up now, seeing Gregarious standing in the dimly lit doorway with his rifle.

"What the hell's going on?" one asked, getting cautiously to his feet. Gregarious was numbed, struck dumb. He simply stared.

Outside in the corridor doors to other rooms were being opened warily, lights flicking on.

"Oh ma Gawd!" It was one of the men in the transit room, standing behind Gregarious, who first realised what had happened.

The junkie was sitting in an enormous pool of blood, eyes and mouth open in shock, his body still twitching. The round had hit him in the chest, blowing his heart right out through an enormous hole in his back. The force of the impact had blown him across the corridor into the far wall, splattering blood and gore everywhere. There was a rich, red dripping slide mark down the wall from five feet high to the body's sitting position. Gregarious' wallet was

still in the junkie's hand on the floor between his knees in a spreading pool of blood pumping from the hole in his chest in ever decreasing spurts.

"Hey man," said the guy in the transit room who had been on his feet first, "you'd better give me the rifle." It was a quiet, cool request. Gregarious didn't resist the gentle pressure as it was taken from him. His eyes were transfixed on the horror against the wall, brain totally frozen. He began to shake violently. His legs went to jelly. He whimpered and fainted to the floor.

"Christ, get the MPs!" said a bystander.

Down on the third floor, the shot snapped Donkey awake. "What the hell was that?"

Ned was sitting up on his bed, his rifle across his knees. "I dunno. Sounded like a rifle shot."

"A rifle shot? What, inside or outside?"

"It sounded too close to be outside."

"Shit! I hope Gregarious is all right."

"He'll be right. It was probably a couple of junkies having a blue. Maybe at that party." He swung on Donkey. "I told you, didn't I, that there'd be trouble! This place is a bloody madhouse sometimes. It's not that unusual to have a shooting here. They reckon it happens about once a month. A couple of guys get high on dope or heavy shit, mix it with booze and the next thing, bang!"

The rest of their transit room was awake as well. They were chattering excitedly, as puzzled as Ned and Donkey by the uproar now raging above them on the fourth floor. One volunteered to investigate.

Two minutes later he came back, white as a ghost. "Some guy's been shot by an Arzzie," he reported.

"Oh Christ!" gasped Ned.

"Gregarious!" muttered Donkey, "Oh noooo!"

"He's meat man, all over the wall, he was trying to steal the Arzzie's wallet, some guy told me."

"The Australian," quizzed Ned, "is he okay?"

"Yeah man. MPs got him. On his way to the brig."

Ned and Donkey stared blankly at one another.

There was no more sleep that night. When the curfew lifted at 0600 they walked out of the Capitol and back to the Canberra in silence.

"Where the hell have you two been?" The duty sergeant, who happened to be Kevin Schutt, Ned's boss, caught them at the front security door. He looked at Ned, hatless, and walking in his socks. "And where's your hat and

boots, Ned?"

"We missed the curfew last night Kev so we had to stay at the Capitol. Me boots and hat got pinched while I was sleeping."

"You were at the Capitol? Did you hear about the shooting?"

"We heard something about a shooting, yeah. What happened?"

"One of our drivers. Gregarious they call him."

"Gregarious got shot?"

"No, he did the shooting. Killed a bloke. The MPs have put him away."

"Shit! We saw him last night, too. He won a hundred on the pokies."

"That's what we heard. Apparently some spaced out junkie was trying to relieve him of it and Gregarious shot him."

"Holy Christ!"

"You blokes had better get inside. You know I ought to charge you. You're not supposed to be out of the Canberra after curfew. You know that."

"Yeah, we're sorry Kev, but time sort of slipped away on us. Pissed."

"Don't do it again," Schutt warned, "at least not while I'm duty sergeant here anyway, or you'll get me in the shit." He dismissed them and then called after Ned as he walked away. "Hey, Ned, what's the latest price for a slouch hat?"

Ned kept walking, half turning back to his boss. "Best price I've heard lately Kev is thirty bucks."

Schutt whistled appreciatively. "And boots?"

"Seventy five."

Schutt clicked his tongue. "Inflation is shocking in this country, eh!"

Ned grinned. "Don't tell Uncle Sam!"

The Americans quickly realised they had no case against Private Paul "Gregarious" Gregory, driver, attached to the Australian Army Headquarters, Saigon. It had been an unfortunate accident. They released him, after two days, into the hands of the Australian Army Command. Their own GI was shipped home in a green body-bag with a purple heart pinned on what was left of his chest. He was officially KIA.

Gregarious was a shuddering, shaking, stuttering wreck. He too was sent home. His papers were marked "unfit for further active service."

"Poor bastard," Donkey reflected to Ned later as they sipped a quiet can on the balcony outside their room, staring blankly at the honking, congested traffic below, "and it wasn't even his fault."

"True, but all the same," muttered Ned, "how would you like having to live

with that for the rest of your life?"

CHAPTER 14

Big Al and Colonel Bradshaw briefed Corporal Errington on the findings of the MPs' bomb squad. Firstly, they asked him, who would have reason to bomb Major Swanker?

Errington was hesitant. "I don't have any proof, sir, but I'm fairly sure the major was having an affair of sorts with Jilly."

"An affair . . . of sorts? I don't follow corporal," Big Al said.

"Let me explain sir. There were a number of occasions when the major would call Jilly into his office to work on some document or other with him. He would close and lock the door, which, at first, I thought was a bit odd. She would re-appear no more than thirty minutes later, sometimes as little as ten minutes, looking kind of strange, guilty even, very flushed in the face. As time went on she became more and more reluctant to go into the major's office for anything at all and when he insisted that she do so, she would re-appear looking as though something had upset her. She began arguing with him, albeit in a very respectful Vietnamese manner, but it was enough to send him into a rage. When that happened he would order her into his office and lock the door again. On these occasions she would re-appear after only a couple of minutes, a look of absolute rage and hatred on her face while he would be as cool as a cucumber, grinning triumphantly almost."

"What the hell was he doing to her?"

"I wasn't sure, sir, until one day, after one of these spats, I noticed a small stain round the crotch of his trousers."

"I see."

"I also know that he stayed at her flat quite regularly. In the early days of their relationship they both made no secret of the fact that he would visit her 'for dinner' as they used to say. But towards the end there I got the impression she had had enough, wanted out, but wasn't game or didn't know how to extricate herself. Maybe she was frightened of losing her job, or something else, who knows."

"Or she didn't want to lose the source of some valuable information," suggested the brigadier.

"Umm, that's not for me to . . ."

"But that had occurred to you as a possibility."

"Yes sir, I must confess it had. "

“So, let’s summarise our situation gentlemen,” suggested the general. “Our major is having an affair with his interpreter which she barely tolerates because she has to, that’s her job. Which would tend to reinforce our suspicions about her being a spy, would it not?

“Yes sir.”

“Then something happens which gives her an out — perhaps us shifting her to PR? And not only does she decide to take it, but get revenge as well. She believes she doesn’t need Swanker any more because she’s got another source. Simpson?”

Errington nodded. “From what I’ve noticed, she’s certainly working on him sir.”

“Right corporal,” Big Al commanded, decision made. “I don't want Major Three-B. . . , err, Swanker, to know about this operation. I have other plans for him. Nor Simpson. And here’s why.”

The general looked down to the yellow scribble pad on his desk and began outlining his plan. When he’d finished he put down the biro he’d been fiddling with and pinned Errington with his eyes. "It must be handled with extreme delicacy. Do you think you can do it?"

"It won't be easy keeping things from Donkey, sir."

"You may be right and eventually he'll have to be told what's going on, but for the time being he must be kept in the dark, just in case he is in some way involved in this weird business although I don't think he is. Unfortunately, we must use him."

"It might help me sir if Private Harding was in on it."

"No, I don't think so. You must run on your own. I'm sorry I can't give you any help but you've been trained for this sort of thing and I have no-one else.”

Errington didn't like the general's plan much at all. It was a bit too fantastic, almost unbelievable! A Russian assassin? Hooo-eeee, who’s going to swallow that? Then again, as the general had said, the bigger the bait, the bigger the fish. Errington sighed resignedly. Ours is not to reason why, ours is but to do *and* die. He wasn’t going to enjoy setting up his mates though.

"Okay sir, she'll be right. I'll start the file on Operation Santa Claus this arvo."

Fuck it, he muttered to himself as he slumped down the stairs to the fourth floor. It had been easy getting out of the office to see Natasha when he only had to fool Swanker. But the general was a different matter. He’d really have to watch his step now.

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Apart from Colonel Pace, the Padre and Donkey, the Saigon PR office was staffed by a sergeant-reporter and two sergeant photographers. Donkey had come to the conclusion that Colonel Pace, whom he judged to be in his early fifties, was going to be all right. He was amiably natured, if a little slow on the uptake sometimes. The combination of this and his name produced his nickname, Tortoise, coined by Bassett. Pace was taller than he looked. He walked with a stoop caused by a bad back. Whenever he did manage to straighten to attention he stood six feet two. But Donkey couldn't help wondering how he had managed to get through the rigours of jungle training. More likely he'd managed to skip it somehow.

A ginger moustache gave him an air of militaristic authority but underneath this facade he was a pussy-cat. He treated his team well though and probably deserved better than what he received in return.

Don Bassett held the sergeant-reporter's post. He was slightly taller than Donkey, at five feet eleven inches and much heavier. He battledweight problems constantly, going on this diet or that, jumping on the wagon for a week at a time only to break out at the end of it and in one night destroy all the good work of the previous six days. Large round eyes were set too close either side of his button nose. His face was round and he had a peculiar habit of licking his lips in a circular motion — quite quickly — before he was about to say something which he thought particularly amusing. He also did it, Donkey soon noticed, between items when he was reading his 1000 hours five-minute Australian news segment which was broadcast throughout South Vietnam five days a week through the American Forces Vietnam Network radio station known as AFVN.

Bassett was a man of widely differing moods, one minute jovial, the next demanding, an absolute pain in the arse. It took Donkey some time to get to know him.

Matt Hillingham and Colin Longhurst were the photographers. They too were Nashos and for some odd reason were two of the few men in the Army Donkey had met who didn't have nicknames. Bassett's was Fred, obviously, after the newspaper cartoon strip character of the same name.

Hillingham was the same height as Donkey. He had a horse head and ears to match. He was married with three kids back home in country Victoria and had a marvellous attitude to the war — it didn't exist. He had a job to do, take

pictures. And that's what he did — in safe areas. He could see no point in going bush with the real soldiers when there was any danger of a firefight. The Army discouraged that sort of thing anyway. It didn't want bloody heroes and foreign correspondents in its ranks — simply photogs who could take good black and white home-town-boy pics for local newspapers. That suited Hillingham just fine. It allowed him to drift from assignment to assignment, smiling benignly, switched off. It was an attitude that served him beautifully because he was to go home almost as sane as the day he arrived in Vietnam.

He saw the value, too, in Ned Tadeusovich's theory about “getting rid of a bit of bad blood". Once a month he would go out by himself and buy "a bit of nookie" as he called it, "purely for health reasons". He was totally devoted to his wife but practical enough to realise that without sexual release occasionally, he'd go home in a strait jacket.

Longhurst was the opposite. Five foot eight, slimly built and quite handsome although he didn't realise it. He was possessed by self-doubt. When he went to Vietnam he left behind a strikingly beautiful girl, a model, and Longhurst constantly worried whether he was good enough for her; whether his enforced absence for so long would make her heart grow less fond. His fears appeared to be totally unfounded. After he'd been in Vietnam for six months she wrote to say she had bought an engagement ring and he was the lucky man. He was over the moon with delight but the very next day his self-doubt was back again, stronger than ever.

He flatly refused to go out on the town for a night under any circumstances. He was determined to stay faithful for the full twelve months to his princess, his Goddess.

"You'll go blind," Bassett had warned him.

Bassett, on the other hand, had the view that he was God's gift to women. For that reason he scorned anyone who paid for what he believed could be won for nothing with just a little bit of smooth talking. His sights were set extremely high. No Noggie sheilas for him. His fleshpots had to be white and round of eye. While his conquests to date had not been too numerous, he did have a few points on the board which in itself was quite remarkable. There were very few roundeye women in war-torn Saigon. He, too, had a girl back home, but that was five thousand miles away. Donkey could always tell when Bassett had been on a roundeye nest for the night. He always came into the office smiling broadly, cheerful to the point of indecency, considering the fact that there was supposed to be a war on. Most other mornings he was his

usual pain in the arse.

One morning when he bounced into the office grinning, his tongue darting around his lips, a hungover Donkey raised his eyebrows. He thought that if Bassett had a tail like his namesake, it would have been wagging furiously.

"Either you're still pissed from last night or you've been on the nest," said Donkey, returning his hazy gaze to his typewriter. His focus was still on the greater distance between himself and Bassett. It wouldn't re-adjust to the shorter frame. He gave up in mild annoyance and returned his gaze to the sergeant. "White or black?"

"White with two, corp," replied Bassett.

"No you dickhead, the piece of ass, as our Septic friends would say."

"You know Simpson, you have a filthy mind. You're a dirty disgusting little turd."

"And loving it. Answer the question."

"As a matter of fact, Private Simpson," said Bassett, taking off his beret and bunging on the halo which he kept for such occasions, "my activities last night had nothing whatsoever to do with a member of the opposite sex. Last night I discovered an oasis in this shitty city. No bloody noise, no bloody Nogs, air conditioning, T-bone steaks, and white women!"

Bassett had emphasised "white women" loudly. The volume was too much for the Tortoise.

"What the bloody hell is all that racket," he croaked painfully from the inner office, obviously nursing a painful hangover he had acquired the previous evening in the course of duty. He had been entertaining, or had been entertained by, a group of Australian journalists.

"Nothing really sir," replied Bassett, "we're just being held at gunpoint by a couple of Charlies."

The Tortoise's fogged brain didn't comprehend. "Well keep it down chaps. I can't work with all that racket going on."

"Yes sir," Bassett said resignedly, peeping around the door into the colonel's office. He was slumped back in his chair, feet up on his desk, eyes closed, brow furrowed deeply and eyebrows knitted. Bassett turned back to Donkey. "Fair dinkum, if I was that crook every morning I reckon I'd play Russian roulette —with my pistol fully loaded."

Donkey managed a half grin. He wasn't all that much brighter this morning than the Tortoise but at least the cup of black coffee was going down and, more importantly, staying there.

"Look," said Bassett, conspirator now, "I was fair dinkum. This Septic major took me to this place called International House on Nguyen Hue Street. It's fantastic! It's like a little piece of the good ol' US of A completely sealed off from this ratshit place. High class, civilians, white only, diplomats, senior American officers, no riff-raff. It's like a bloody gentlemen's club!"

"You were popping pills last night weren't you."

"No! Fair dinkum, you just wouldn't believe this place . . ."

"I don't."

"Look you smart bastard, I'll take you there. Downstairs are Vegas style bars . . .

"Not interested."

". . . and upstairs there's this magnificent dining room with the biggest t-bones you've ever seen; white table cloths, silver cutlery, the best French, German and Californian wines; and the coup de gras — a piano bar."

"A piano *what?"*

"Piano bar. This room, dark and dim, lined with purple drapes, floor to ceiling, no windows, a bar curving along one wall and directly opposite is this bloody great grand piano with a three-foot wide polished mahogany extension built around it as a bar. You pull up a stool, put your drink down and sing along with the guy playing the piano. All very civilised and very proper though. If you farted I reckon they'd turf you out."

"Where'd you say this place was?"

"On Nguyen Hue Street."

"Never heard of it," Donkey sniffed. Bassett threw his arms in the air in exasperation. "That's because there's no bloody bars on the street and the only fucking streets you know are crowded with poxy Noggie sheilas who only know four words of English: *You buy me tea*. Raise you sights above the navel, lad!"

"Actually I'm a tit-man," corrected Donkey, "not that there's much value in that is this bloody country. Are you trying to tell me that in this land of balls and bayonets, there are real women, roundeyes with real norks?"

"Look, I'll take you to this place tonight. Got any money?"

"Day before payday?"

"Shit. I should be able to lend you five."

"Right. I'll be in it then. I'd love to see this Shangri La."

"There is a small problem though."

"Aha, I thought so! Here come de catch. What's the con this time, ol'

buddy?"

"Well, you've got to be a member of the place to get in. Of course, a member can sign in one guest."

"So you're all right Jack with your Septic major mate. How do I get in?"

"I dunno, but I'll talk to Larry, my Yank mate. He'll think of something."

Bassett wandered into the inner office which he shared with Colonel Pace, now snoring fitfully. He turned on the short wave radio, permanently tuned to Radio Australia, the noise and static jerking the Tortoise out of his shell and blowing the back-to-work whistle for the little green men with hammers inside his skull. Refreshed, they attacked the Tortoise's brain cells with great vigour, the sound of their pickaxes distorting into a sharp squeak followed by an echoing, drawn-out groan forcing itself from his throat. His eyes flicked open momentarily, didn't like what they couldn't see and slid shut again.

"Sergeant," he groaned, "must we have that radio, that damn static, on at this hour of the day?"

"Got to get the home news for Johnny sir. He'll be worried about his Mum."

"Christ!" muttered the colonel painfully through gritted teeth. He lifted his feet down from his desk with great effort, stood up slowly and shuffled, like a man with a bent iron rod shoved up his backbone, out into the outer office.

Donkey first saw the colonel's head appear around the door into his office followed jerkily by his shoulders with the rest of his body trailing a sad and sorry last.

"Good morning sir!" he almost shouted enthusiastically, snapping to attention from his seated position behind the typewriter, sending his metal legged chair screeching back across the flagstoned floor.

The colonel jerked ramrod straight, eyes and teeth clenched, ears ringing. Recovering slowly, he unlocked his jaws and peeped through slitted eyes. He tried to speak but his tongue was still stuck to the roof of his mouth. His body slumped back into its normal semi-erect position, as though it was lunging into a gale.

"Morning Donkey," he managed to cough. Willing his legs back into action, clenching his buttocks tightly, he resumed his forced march into the hurricane and disappeared through the outer office door.

Jilly and the Padre giggled in unison. Donkey grinned broadly and resumed his seat behind the typewriter, turning his attention back to the press

release he had been typing. The screeching of the chair hadn't done his own head much good but it had been worth it just to see how it affected the colonel — and to get a reaction from Jilly.

Casting his eyes over the words about how well Australian Diggers were helping to "win hearts and minds" in Phuoc Tuy Province, Donkey groaned loudly.

"What?" said Bassett from the inner office.

"This bloody press release," steamed Donkey. "Shit! Does anybody back home really believe this garbage? Fair dinkum, it's enough to drive a bloke to drink putting out this crap."

"Since when have you needed driving to drink? You, who would drink out of a poxy whore's panties." Bassett chortled and turned his attention to Radio Australia which was just beginning its news service. It was 0900. Each day he would tape this and use the best on his “News from Australia” bulletin. He would then rewrite it into the breezy commercial radio style he preferred before turning his attention to the carefully “desensitised” news signals sent to him by Army PR HQ in Canberra. Generally these were more than twenty four hours old, stale, dull and worthless. "Fancy having to depend on this shit for a news service," he'd mutter, almost daily, as he leafed through the signals. "Thank God for Radio Australia, even if it is the dreary old ABC. They at least give us the news."

As Bassett settled down to his re-writing, Colonel Pace re-entered the outer office at a slow, reasonably upright trot. The gale appeared to have dropped a few knots. His buttocks were unclenched and the pained expression on his face had been replaced by one of relief.

"That must be a weight off your mind sir," said Donkey cheerily.

"Yes, indeed it . . ." The colonel stopped himself mid-sentence. He smelt a rat. "Just what do you mean by that, Private Simpson?" he queried, indignantly, eyebrows snuggling down quizzically.

"This press release sir. Those Civic Affairs people are doing such a damn fine job down there at the Dat for the Nogs that you were quite right in insisting on this story being spot-on before we release it to the papers back home. Damn fine story, sir."

Colonel Pace suspected very strongly he was being had but he just wasn't quite sure. *Damn difficult thinking at this time of the morning.*He decided to let it pass — this time.

"Yes, well . . ." he muttered, "get on with it. I want that up to the general

this afternoon for his approval. Can't miss our deadlines you know." He disappeared into his office.

"Yes sir," answered Simpson. Silly old fart, he whispered to himself.

The morning dragged on, Simpson's fingers punching half-heartedly at the typewriter keys. It was too bloody hot and he was too crook to concentrate properly. And the Padre, sitting at his desk next to Donkey, was chattering like a monkey as usual, while Jilly was twittering like a sparrow in reply. Donkey had learned by now that there was no stopping the Padre. It was simply easier to ignore him, switch off. He turned on the radio just before 1000 to hear Bassett tell Privates Smith and Jones, somewhere out in the Long Hai hills or knee-deep in a stinking rice paddy, "the news from Orstralia."

Bassett arrived back in the office just in time to go to lunch, but wanting to save what they had left of their pay for their night at the International House, he and Donkey reluctantly ate at the Free World mess before going on to the roof and stripping to shorts to improve their tans.

"Becoming more like Nogs every day, we are," observed Donkey as he surveyed his oddly sandy-tanned chest.

"Well, what do you expect!" sniffed Bassett. "It's their sun. Look what it's done to the Nogs. And they're terrified of it mate. Even the sheilas wear trousers and those bloody great upside down wok hats to protect them from it. And still they go yellow. So what hope have we got, especially laying here like this. It's not an Australian sun you're baking under now you know. It's a Noggie sun. Under our sun, mate, you go black. Look at the boongs. Under this sun you go yella. Simple." He grinned.

The logic of Bassett's argument impressed Donkey. He sat up and pulled his shirt back on. "Bugger this," he said, "no bastard is gunna start callin' me a yella fella." He slumped back down the stairs to the office, planning to occupy the couch in the colonel's air conditioned office and have a nap. Everybody had gone to lunch and wouldn't be back for at least another hour, he figured.

He was wrong. Jilly was sitting on the couch, knitting.

"Hullo," Donkey said with some surprise, "no lunch today?"

"I eat already," Jilly smiled broadly.

"And no siesta?"

"She screwed her shoulders up and shivered. "Too cold in here! Book-oo cold!"

It wasn't cold at all, Donkey reflected. Just not as stinking hot as outside. But Jilly obviously was cold. Her nipples shone through the thin fabric of her bra and ao dai as she hugged herself tightly. Donkey felt a slight stirring in his loins.

"Well then Jilly," he suggested jokingly, "I'll soon warm you up. Come here and I'll give you a big cuddle!" He stood above her, holding his arms wide in invitation, grinning broadly. To his absolute astonishment, she slowly placed her knitting on the floor beside her and daintily got to her feet. She smiled up at him, holding back, teasing, wresting control of the situation from him. He felt unable to move, as she won control of him with her black eyes, a pinprick of light at their centres.

Slowly she broke the spell, moving the one pace towards him, cuddling gently against his chest, her arms creeping around him. She placed her head on his chest, and purred.

"Mmmmm, warm, book-oo warm," she murmured, pressing herself into him more firmly. Donkey could do little else but close his arms around her. She was teasing him unmercifully, he realised, and it was working. He was as hard as a marrow, speechless, he had lost control. Her jet black straight hair shone brilliantly as it cascaded halfway down her back; he felt her breasts, soft against him, and the firmness of her hips as she pressed them into his groin. Her smell excited him. But he was confused. He wanted this woman, and yet he did not. Did she want him or was this just a charade? What the hell's going on, he asked himself, his mind whirling.

Jilly turned her head from his chest and looked up into his eyes. "Mmmm, I like," she murmured mischievously, "you *hot stuff* Darn-key!" She wiggled her hips slightly, rubbing Donkey's already iron-hard groin into a new frenzy of excitement. "You like?" she asked, a picture of innocence.

He couldn't talk. He leaned down towards her mouth slowly, terrified she might pull away, make a fool of him. She didn't. Their mouths joined softly, fleetingly, and then she did pull away, quickly.

Jilly had heard the heavy footfalls of the Tortoise bounding back into the office, full of hops, demanding that his troops man the battlements again.

The fact that his troops, with the exception of Donkey and Jilly, were not even in the castle didn't appear to faze him. He headed straight for his desk, oblivious to his surroundings, and reached for his in-tray.

"Good lunch colonel?" inquired Jilly.

"Yes thank you Jilly, but I thought I'd better get back a little early today

and take the cutlass to this red tape. Ha ha!"

"War's hell," groaned Donkey as he turned and headed back to his own desk. He sat down behind the typewriter and watched the afternoon steam away.

"Pick you up at seven," Bassett directed as they climbed aboard their respective buses at the end of the day. "And don't forget to wear your uniform and your slouch hat, not your beret."

"Yeah, sure, but I'm not wearing the slouch hat. It's too much of a bloody nuisance when you take it off. Nowhere to put the damn cumbersome thing most times."

"No, wear it tonight. We've got to be typical Aussies tonight, mate."

By the time the cab had dropped Donkey, Bassett and his GI major friend from the radio station outside International House the conspiracy to get Donkey inside had been worked out. It was a most unimpressive place from the outside. It looked just like its crowded-in neighbouring buildings, with the exception that it had two sand-bagged machine gun posts out front, complete with the compulsory white 44-gallon drums filled with concrete. The Americans had gone to a lot of trouble to camouflage their retreat, to make it blend into the streetscape and had succeeded — then plonked the machine gun nests and drums outside.

As Donkey watched from a distance, Bassett and his GI, on production of the membership card, were waved into the club by an armed doorman.

This is bloody mad, he thought. How am I going to work this con? Standing back some twenty yards, it was some five minutes before he could summon enough courage to approach the club's entrance. He then stood there for about two minutes, attracting the attention of the doorman who was naturally suspicious of anyone standing outside his club for any length of time. Just then a black limo with American military plates pulled up and a colonel jumped from the rear seat. Donkey had no choice but to go for it.

"Excuse me sir," bubbled Donkey as he saluted the colonel, "I'm in a spot of bother. I was supposed to meet a member of the club here who was going to show me your delightful home away from home but I arrived late and I fear he may have tired of waiting for me and gone on inside already. I wonder if it would be asking too much of you to sign me in so I can see if he's in there." The words came out in a rush. God, he's got to see through this con, Donkey thought, as the colonel quickly eyed him over.

"Hey sure!" said the colonel enthusiastically. "Anything for an Orstralian

buddy! Come on in!"

Much relieved, Donkey followed the colonel into the club. *The uniform*, he thought. *The slouch hat! Bloody passports to pleasure!* His estimate of Bassett went up a notch.

"Hey, there he is," said Donkey, spying Bassett's GI major playing a poker machine just inside the inner door. "Thanks a million, colonel sir."

"Just a minute buddy," said the colonel. Donkey's heart dropped into his spit-polished shoes. Sprung! He hasn't fallen for the con at all! He was just stringing me along! Bloody Bassett. The bastard's set me up! I knew a private's uniform wouldn't be impressive enough.

"You've got to check in your hat and weapon here before you go in," said the colonel, smiling. "You got a weapon?"

"N-no," said Donkey, totally confused.

"Well, you got a hat. Hey-y, you wanna sell that hat? Fifty bucks. Waddya say, hey, fifty bucks?"

"N-no," stammered Donkey, "I, ah, can't sell the hat colonel. I, ah, check it in here?"

"Hell, that's a great hat soldier. Pity." The colonel was genuinely sorry that Donkey wouldn't sell his slouch hat. And Donkey, once he had quickly regained his composure, almost felt sorry for him.

"Sorry colonel. Regulations. But I'll tell you what. I might be able to get one for you though. They're hard to come by and pretty expensive but I'll see what I can do for you. You've been most kind to me, after all."

"Hey, that's great! Here, here's my card. Call me anytime, okay?"

Donkey never expected to see anything like International House until he returned home. A real bar, polished wood, brass footrails, thick carpet, all surrounded by the inevitable poker machines.

"Wait 'til you see upstairs," grinned Bassett.

"Hey man, hold on there!" said the spike-haired major, Larry Lankawicz, to Bassett, "let's show the guy around down here first."

He walked over to the bar and came back with three cold beers — in frosted glass mugs. They sat down in a red velvet wallpapered lounge in matching red leather armchairs .

"Not bad eh!" Bassett was still grinning at Donkey's wide-eyed appreciation of the club.

"It would do me as a home away from home."

"Finish your beer and we'll go up to the piano bar. That's something else

again."

Donkey downed the half-mug remaining and followed Lankawicz and Bassett up a short flight of stairs to a mezzanine floor. Bassett pushed on an enormous diamond patterned, leather padded door and they followed him in. The piano bar was so quiet, that was the thing that struck Donkey most. No hooting, honking traffic, no buzzing of motorbikes from outside. The floor to ceiling drapes went around the walls in graceful red-purple curves while soft lights threw spots on the bars and richly carpeted burgundy floor. It was like walking into paradise compared with what was going on just a few feet away outside.

"They've sound-proofed the entire building. Well, what did I tell you!" Bassett was grinning broadly.

"You were right. It's sensational! And it's your shout."

They sat down on stools facing the main bar. Donkey noticed with disappointment that the lid on the grand piano behind its vast curving bar on the opposite wall was closed. Bassett ordered and three small green bottles and three glasses were placed in front of them.

"What's that?" asked Donkey.

"Ignorant country boy, that's Heineken. It's a Dutch beer and the next best thing to Foster's."

Donkey soon found he was right again.

"In this place, you ask for it, they've got it," Bassett beamed.

Looking around, Donkey could see that the establishment was indeed high class. There were no badges of rank under major; 'bird' colonels were commonplace but the majority of people were in civilian clothes.

"A lot of them are diplomatic personnel from the American Embassy and the rest are the leaders of American civil firms working over here building roads etcetera," Bassett explained. "No riff-raff in this joint mate, no bloody Saigon teas either."

"Except us. Riff-raff I mean." Donkey was over-awed. Only the bloody Septics could build a place like this in the middle of an Asian war, he thought.

"No bloody round-eyes yet though," Bassett sniffed. Donkey hadn't even noticed. He looked around now and noticed there wasn't one likely looking female in the place. The two who were in the bar were typical over-painted American wives, and they looked as though they'd been on good pasture for a long time.

The "Australia" flashes on Bassett and Donkey's shoulders soon attracted the attention of the curious American officers. And, just like their troops, they too wanted to meet "an Arzzie". Bassett and Donkey were soon talking to a group of about eight.

Donkey found them to be more intelligent than their rifle-carrying subordinates but their general knowledge of Australia was still poor. However, Donkey thought, there'd be no selling kangaroo feathers to this lot. You might get away with the koala and goanna story — once. And when you got caught you'd have to admit you'd just been pulling their legs, ha, ha, and hope they had a sense of humor.

At one stage Donkey tried to buy the round of drinks he owed Lankawicz and Bassett but the Yanks wouldn't hear of it. Bassett and Donkey drank free for the rest of the evening, despite their protests.

Around seven thirty the piano began to tinkle. The pianist had arrived and was playing simple mood music. It seemed to Donkey to improve the tone of the place another one hundred per cent.

Bassett introduced him to the pianist, Tom Logan, who worked in the American Embassy and moonlighted each night at the "I" House, as it was called. He had a smooth crooner's voice. His scene was Crosby, Martin, Sinatra, Como. He stuck to it and did it well.

Of course, it was just the type of laid-back stuff the clientele wanted to hear. Jimi Hendrix would have burst blood vessels — not ear drums — in this club.

By the time Bassett and Donkey had left at 2030 hours (the curfew was due down at 0900) Donkey had met some quite fascinating people. In fact, he thought, he now probably knew more high ranking American officers than his boss.

What was more important was that the entire night had cost him zilch.

"Sure beats hell out of boom-boom bars," he remarked to Bassett as their taxi weaved its way back to their respective hotels.

"You can pay the cab fare," commanded a dejected Bassett.

"What have you got the shits about?"

"Not one bloody round-eye all night. Not one! I can't believe it."

"For cryin' out loud! Forget your beloved round-eye nookie just for once, will ya! I reckon that was a bloody good night." Donkey sighed as he peered through the grime on the cab window. "Fancy having to come back out to this from that."

"it's another world, isn't it. Absolutely unreal."

"Yeah. I reckon we might have to make the odd trip back there, you know. Particularly if the general cost is on a par with tonight. You know, those fellas almost restored my faith in 'truth, justice and the American way'."

"Yeah, well you can fraternise with Superman if you like, but I've got my sights set on Lois Lane."

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When Donkey arrived back at the Canberra he was dying to tell Ned all about the "I" House. It would surely stun the boy from the ghettos of Warsaw and Adelaide, he thought. But Ned wasn't there. His bed hadn't been disturbed. He was obviously out for the night, probably getting himself a dose from Fabulous Fanny, Donkey sniffed to himself, somewhat jealously.

And his thoughts returned to Jilly. She was keen on him! Before she left work that evening she had picked a moment when the office was clear, quickly pecked him on the cheek, gently squeezing his left hand as it sat on his typewriter keyboard, and wished him "sweet dreams". What had she meant by that? He went to bed wondering, dreaming.

He was woken the next morning by Ned banging into the room at six thirty. He stripped quickly and with a snapped "good morning" headed into the shower.

"Where the bloody hell have you been?" demanded Donkey.

"Tell you in a minute," came a watery shout.

Donkey got out of bed and put the toaster on and plugged in the coffee percolator. You never know, he thought, one of these days the bloody thing might boil in time for us to have a cup before the bus arrives. They couldn't use hot water from the tap because the local water was undrinkable. It had to be taken from a water cooler in the atrium and that was almost icy cold.

"Ah good," said Ned coming out of the shower, "toast. I'm bloody starving."

"So how was Fabulous Fanny?" asked Donkey.

"No, it wasn't her," muttered Ned, grabbing a piece of Donkey's toast. Ned wasn't his normal self, Donkey suddenly noticed. He seemed apprehensive about something.

"What happened?"

"I almost got myself killed, that's what happened!" snapped Ned. "Holy shit! I'll never do that again."

"What did you do?"

Ned sighed. He put more bread in the toaster. "When you came home and said you were going to that I House of yours I got a bit pissed off so I decided to have a night out myself. I went out with a few other blokes and went into Fanny's bar but she wasn't there. So I hung around to see if she'd turn up but she didn't. I suppose I must have got pissed too because just before curfew I put the hard word on another sheila. Christ! When I woke up this morning I couldn't believe I'd done it. She was as ugly as a hatful of arse'oles."

Donkey laughed. "Any crutch in a crisis."

"Hang on, you can laugh! You haven't heard the worst of it yet. We walked out of the bar and I said I'd get a cab. She gave me a thumbs down to that and beckoned me to follow her. I thought 'that's handy, her room's close by'. But it wasn't her room that was around the corner, it was her bike."

"Bike?"

"Yeah, she had a motorbike, a Honda 125cc, I think it was. So I jumped on the back and away we went. We buzzed through Saigon proper and then into the backblocks on the other side of the city. I was lost within five minutes and I'll tell you what, I was starting to get a little worried. The streets got narrower and narrower and I was completely bushed. I didn't know whether to stay with her or jump off and run. I was beginning to think that she was taking me to the VC, that she was a VC herself. But if I'd jumped off the bike I wouldn't have had any idea where I was or where to go and we were right on curfew as it was. In the finish I think I was so shit-scared I just sat where I was and hoped for the best."

Ned grabbed the two pieces of toast that had just popped up from the toaster and buttered them. "How's the coffee?"

Donkey felt the pot. "Stone fucking cold as usual," he muttered.

Ned stuffed a piece of toast spread thinly with Vegemite into his mouth and continued his story. "We ended up swinging into this shanty town with laneways only two bikes wide and then I really started packing the shits. The bird kept turning corners, this way and that; I had no idea in the world where I was. Finally she stopped and motioned me off. She wheeled the bike through this doorway in the most ramshackle timber and tin hut you've ever seen in your life. I couldn't stand up straight inside. Fair dinkum, it was like a bloody chook house. I followed her — and got the shock of my life. Jammed into this tiny room, all seated around a small table, was mamasan, papasan, and grandma and grandpa . . ."

"You're joking!"

"No! I'm fair bloody dinkum, mate. She'd brought me home to meet the family! Well, sort of. She began jabbering away while she parked her bike — right there in the shanty's main room — and the oldies just stared at me, you know, the usual blank Noggie stare. Shit, it was eerie. I didn't know what to do . . ."

"You could have said 'G'day, I'm here ta shag ya daughter'."

"Smart bastard! They knew that anyway. What other reason would I have been there for, after curfew! Anyhow, I did manage to say g'day, as a matter of fact, I think, but I was shittin' myself. I was wondering who was going to produce the knife. But they just sat there, staring, straight at me, totally expressionless. When the bird indicated that I should follow her through a tiny doorway I was more than happy to follow. She took me into this bedroom that was about a foot bigger than the bed and fair dinkum, I've seen better hen houses. There were bloody great gaps in the floor and walls, no windows, Jesus, what a dump. There must have been cockroaches everywhere but I couldn't see in the dark."

Ned stopped to shove another piece of toast into his mouth. Impatient to hear the rest of the story, a grinning Donkey urged him to continue.

"Well, she got her gear off and jumped into bed and indicated that I should do the same. I didn't know whether to go on with the job or what but the sight of her body soon made up my mind. She had a face like a sour prune but the body was top class. So I got the gear off and crawled in beside her . . . oh, not before handing over twenty five bucks which she demanded there and then. I soon discovered this bird was all business. No mucking about. Her view was that I'd paid for boom-boom and that's all I was getting. She just laid there like a great lump of meat. It was bloody disastrous. When I'd shot me bolt she just rolled over and went to sleep. There was no way known I was going to go to sleep and after about half an hour I tried her again. She told me in no uncertain terms to didi mau. I wasn't going to argue either — it was her territory.

"The next thing I knew it was dawn and I counted my blessings that I was still alive. I hadn't meant to go to sleep at all but I guess the booze beat me. I jumped up, dressed and got out of there as quick as I could. And I was surprised to find that my wallet hadn't been touched. I was so glad to get out of that place that I wouldn't have cared if they'd taken every dollar I had.

"Anyway, once outside the place I was completely bushed. There were little alleys going in all directions. I had no idea which way to go so I turned

left and just blundered on. That was the direction from which we'd come the previous night, I thought. It was still early, about five thirty, and there weren't many people about, luckily.

"I blundered about these alleys for about fifteen minutes before I found a main road and breathed a huge sigh of relief — until I realised the curfew was still on and there were no taxis about — and that's when I saw them."

"Who?"

"A bunch of cowboys, but they could have been Charlie, the way they looked at me. They were sitting around on their motorbikes, half a dozen of them, about a hundred yards away, and they looked bloody mean. And then I realised I had no fucking weapon. That really put the wind up me. They didn't appear to have any either although there was no way I could be sure. I realised the only thing I had that was of any use was the brass badge on my beret . . ."

Donkey laughed. "The badge on your beret! What bloody good would that do?"

"Listen mate," snarled Ned, "when that's all you've got you get ready to use it! I thought that if they had a go at me I might make a few of them bleed before they kicked me to death. I thought I might have been able to kick the shitter out of a couple of them but six was a few too many. I didn't hang around though. I just kept walking away and they sat there, watching me go. There was no point running, those bikes would have run me down inside fifty yards. And anyway, where was I going to run to? I didn't even know where I was."

"What happened then?"

"I heard some silly bastard whistling *Good Old Collingwood Forever*."

"What!"

"It was that mad bastard Jansen. He appeared out of nowhere, singing the fucking Collingwood theme song. I would have been all right if that stupid prick hadn't waltzed into the scene, waving his fucking scarf."

"Where did he come from?"

"He'd been out shaggin' somebody's daughter too, he told me later."

"I don't believe this!"

"Hey mate, I was there and I didn't believe it! I dunno what Jansen had done to those cowboys but as soon as they saw him they started jabbering and pointing and starting up their bikes."

"Maybe they were Carlton supporters," chuckled Donkey.

“Piss off! The leader of the bunch rode straight at us, waving a knife. Jesus I was shitting myself.

"Fuck!"

"This prick headed straight for Jansen who stood stock still. When the bloke was almost on top of him he took one neat step to the side like a bloody bullfighter and swung his scarf. To my absolute amazement the scarf knocked this arse'ole right off his bike, into the air . . ."

"How?"

"He had a fucking great lump of chain in it, didn't he! I hadn't noticed it and obviously neither had the Noggie. Well, that won a battle but it started a war. The poor Noggie was laying on the ground howling in pain. I reckon the chain must have broken his entire ribcage. Then the others headed for us, en masse, all flashing knives. I thought, fuck, this is it! Mate, we’re going to get slaughtered! And all fucking mad Jansen could do was sing *Good Old Collingwood Forever*. He really is out of his tree, that bastard. He just stood there, swingin' his scarf."

When Sam Smiley came out of the alley he couldn't believe his eyes. There in front of him was that mad bastard Jansen swinging a black and white scarf and Ned waving his beret at a bunch of cowboys brandishing knives and about to ride right over the top of them. He grabbed the Browning 9mm pistol he always carried in his pocket, flicked off the safety and fired blindly at the cowboys.

It was just the thing he needed to relieve his frustration after another abortive night on the nest. He had tried another bar this time, a new one, and had been going really well with one girl. She had agreed to take him home, and for only twenty five dollars, when the bar closed. And this time he was smarter than the girl, allowing, even encouraging, her to jerk him off early in the night. That way, he figured, he would be pumped up again and ready later when the real action began.

"Tonight baby you get some," he sang to himself as the girl's motorbike weaved through the back alleys. He perched on the back, his wispy hair blowing in the night breeze, paunch pressed firmly into her tight backside.

But everything had gone terribly wrong, again. He climbed into the girl's bed full of eager anticipation. At last, he breathed heavily, at last! He fondled the girl clumsily, in a blind rush, and she feigned a flood of excitement. He threw himself between her legs, panting loudly, prodding like a blind man with a cane looking for a pothole he knew was in the footpath but couldn't

find. Then he realised his banana was still bent. Like a dead slug.

The girl tried every trick she knew to get SS's sergeant-major to stand to attention. But at 47 years old, the ferret reckoned he'd been given one run for the night and that was enough.

SS was beside himself with frustration. "You little bastard!" he commanded, "get up!"

The girl shook her head, surveying the flaccid, wrinkled worm. "Numbah tennnnn," she muttered and looked at SS with sympathy and pity. He looked down at his disinterested digit and abused it yet again. "Get up you fucking little bastard!"

The girl thought that was funny. "He no fuckee bastard," she giggled. "He no can fuckee at all!" She leapt out of the bed and disappeared, sniggering loudly. He never saw her again. And she'd taken his money. He could only whimper with humiliation again.

So when he had the chance to loose off a shot the next morning, even though it was with his pistol and not his gun, and even though every shot missed, he was delighted to do so.

"When I heard the shots I almost died," Ned told Donkey. "And then I looked around and there was SS, yelling and screaming and waving his pistol. You should have seen those cowboys move those bikes. They burnt rubber goin' backwards. But just when we thought we were in the clear the cowboys stopped about a hundred yards away and produced pistols from their saddle bags. We didn't know where to go, what to do. Then I heard someone calling me, 'Ned, Ned!' I turned around and it was Fanny. She was at the end of a lane beckoning to us frantically. We followed. We didn't have any choice. She ran us up alleys and down alleys, through houses and shacks and shanties, we had no idea where we were. Finally we came out on a main road. 'Quick you go!' she told us.

"It was just after six by this stage and slowly traffic was starting to build. A cab came along and we grabbed it. Shit! I've never been so relieved in all my life. Jeez, I owe that sheila."

"Where the hell did she come from?"

"Mate, I've no idea and I didn't hang around to ask."

Donkey sighed. "You're a crazy bastard Ned. How many lives do you reckon you've got left now?"

Ned grinned. "Dunno, but I reckon I've just used one for sure! And after what Fanny said to me as we jumped in the cab I might be due to lose another

one."

"Why? What did she say?"

"She virtually accused me of being unfaithful. Fancy that! A whore accusing a bloke of being unfaithful! Said she'd bite my balls off next time she saw me. I didn't have time to hang around and argue. I think I'll give her a miss for a week or two."

Donkey laughed. "Car-mon. The bus will be here any tick." He turned to the coffee percolator, just beginning to bubble. "Just when the coffee's ready again, as usual."

"You know, the thing that really pisses me off is that the sheila was a waste of twenty five bucks. Fuckin' hopeless she was."

"Well, you could look at it this way: you've probably kept her family in tucker for a month with that dough."

"You're probably right. I'll tell you what though, never again!"

"No. At least not until the next time you get randy." Donkey grinned. "Quick, there's the bus now." He turned to the coffee percolator and abused it. "One of these mornings we're going to get a cup out of you, you bastard!"

But this morning he wasn't as pissed off with it as usual. With any sort of luck, Jilly would have one waiting for him when he got to work. He was really looking forward to that.

CHAPTER 15

Donkey was surprised to find Jilly wasn't at work when he and the Padre walked into the office that morning. He mentioned it to Holyrod.

"It's Saturday, stupid. You know she doesn't work weekends."

"Damn! Yes, I forgot. Oh well, have to make my own coffee."

Donkey found he was terribly disappointed and he moped through the day. He couldn't keep his thoughts off her. And it would be Monday before he'd see her again.

He sought out Ned for lunch and they took sandwiches from the canteen up on to the roof.

"I had to go out to Tan Son Nhut this morning and I did a bit of a trade," Ned told Donkey between mouthfuls of tuna salad.

"What this time?"

"A Jeep."

"A Jeep! Where in hell would you get a Jeep?"

"Off some Septics I met."

"Are you fair dinkum?"

"Yeah, actually they wanted to sell me a chopper."

"A chopper!"

"One of those little plastic bubble observation jobs."

Donkey groaned. What had Ned done this time? "All right, tell me all about it."

"Well, I was doing a little business with the kangaroo feathers when these blokes reckoned they wouldn't mind a few cans of that 'great Arzzie beer'. I said I might be able to accommodate them but the beer was heavily rationed and hard to get, bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. I think I laid it on them a bit heavy because when I asked them what they had to trade, they said would a chopper be ok."

"Unbelievable!" sighed Donkey.

"I thought 'this is all right. We can fly down to Vung Tau to the beach for weekends' . . ."

"For Christ's sake, Ned!"

"Hang on, hang on, don't get your knackers in a knot. But then I thought,

'who's going to fly the thing?' so I asked them if they could throw a pilot in on the deal. That tossed them although they did think about it for a bit. So then I said that a Jeep would be handy and they said that was easy! So we've got a Jeep."

"You're incredible! It would be bloody handy though. No more buses, taxis, kamikazes . . ."

"And as long as we're in uniform we can buggerise about after curfew too because it's a military vehicle. No probs."

"That, mate, is just when our 'probs' are likely to start! No, bugger you mate, you get me into enough strife already."

"Car-mon Donkey, it'll only cost you a case of cans."

"Cost me! What do you mean, cost me?"

"Well, you want to be partners, don't you?"

"No! What was the deal?"

"Two cases of cans and a pair of boots."

"Is that all? For a Jeep?"

"Remember, they did want to sell me a chopper."

"I remember. And you want me to fork out for two dozen cans?"

"Only if you want to be a partner. If you don't, I'll easy find someone else."

"Righto, righto, don't come the hard sell. What about petrol? Where are we going to keep the thing? There's nowhere around here we can stash it. We can't leave it out the front without questions being asked; we can't put it in some Noggie's garage even if you could find such a thing and you can't stick it in with the Transport pool vehicles. They'd commandeer it. Have you thought about these things?"

"Yep, the petrol's right. Access to that whenever we want it is part of the deal. Where to keep it is another thing. That's got me a bit tossed at the moment, but I'll think of something . . ."

"Undoubtedly," sighed Donkey.

"Well, are you in? The pay-off and pick-up is on next week."

"Bloody hell, Ned! If this gets us in more shit I'll have your guts for garters!"

"Good on yer mate! Just think of it! We can go to the I House, pick up some roundeyes and maybe drive down to Vung Tau for a dirty weekend or two . . ."

"Oh God," muttered Donkey miserably, "here we go again."

***

When Major Swanker came to his senses and realised that Jilly had planted the bomb in his office, at first he wondered why. What had she been trying to destroy? It was some time before he realised it was not a case of what, but who. Him.

God, what should he do? She had tried to *kill* him! His lover! His China doll! She *was* a spy, there could be no doubt about that at all now. The general had been right. And then the full force of what that meant crashed through his skull like an AK47 bullet: he had been sleeping with an enemy spy. He had, more than likely, supplied information to the enemy.

"Oh my God, no," he whimpered, the thermometer falling out of his mouth.

"Pardon honey?" said the American nurse in a heavy nasal twang as she tried to take his pulse. She picked up the thermometer from his lap where it had fallen and slammed it straight back under his tongue, as if she was bayoneting him very precisely between the third and fourth molars, ignoring him, concentrating on the watch pinned to her ballooning bosom.

Swanker didn't even attempt to answer the question. He tried to think. He wondered how safe he was in the American hospital, whether Jilly could get at him again. He shivered with fright.

"Cold honey?" the nurse nasaled to herself. Her concentration didn't flicker from her watch.

He didn’t hear her. Panic was rising like bile in his throat. But was it really Jilly he should worry about most? What if the general, the Army, found out he'd been sleeping with a spy? What would *they* do to him? His face broke out in a sweat.

"Hot honey?" She dropped his wrist, apparently satisfied that his heart was still pumping, pulled the thermometer from his mouth, studied it briefly and popped it back into a glass of water beside his bed. She forced a smile on to her hairy blonde visage, turned on her heel and bent over the patient in the neighbouring bed, ensuring his eyes crawled hungrily down into her voluminous cleavage as she fussed with his sheets. "You okay honey?" she drawled as she did, by rote, a hundred times a day, every day of every war-weary year. War's hell, yeah.

They would court-martial him, that's what they'd do. They'd lock him up and throw away the key, if he was lucky. And he'd have to live with that, for the rest of his worthless life. At least Jilly was only trying to kill him.

He had to think. He had to play smart. He had to beat Jilly at her own game. He had to at least get in the second punch. She was the danger. The only way the Army could find out about their affair would be if either of them talked.

Suddenly the major steeled himself. He decided it wasn't going to be him who blabbed. He had too much to lose. And it wasn't going to be Jilly, either. He'd have to make certain of that. In the meantime, he'd have to play damn cool.

***

Ned and Donkey had the next day off. It was a Sunday and after a sleep-in until 0800, Donkey announced it was probably about time he paid some lip service to the Almighty if he wanted to survive this war for much longer and that he was going to go into town to Mass.

Ned scoffed. "Waste of a bloody good day."

"I'm not going to argue religion with you. Not after the bullshit I copped day in, day out, with the Padre."

"All right. Look, I'll tell you what we'll do. It's bloody boring sitting around here all day. After you go to your precious Mass, why don't we wander around for the rest of the day? There might be something in this city we haven't seen yet."

"Good idea. But I'm not coming back from the other side of town where the church is to pick you up. You'll have to come with me."

Ned agreed, so long as he didn't have to go to Mass. He'd wander around and meet Donkey outside when it was over.

The church was in the Paris section of Saigon, only two streets away from General Melville-Smith's house and a further two from the Presidential Palace. In this town it seemed as though the Micks had the money and the rest could go bite Buddha's bum. The congregation was mainly Caucasian and that's why Donkey preferred it to the vast Saigon Cathedral which was closer to the Canberra but had an almost exclusive Vietnamese congregation. The cathedral Mass was in Vietnamese, too, which he didn't understand, and the building just seemed so vulnerable. The one and only time he had been there he kept wondering when a Charlie was going to burst into the place and throw a satchel bomb, blowing the congregation to a premature heaven.

"Is this it?" queried Ned when they arrived at the church by taxi. "Small,

isn't it. I imagined something like the Cathedral."

"No, actually it's more like a chapel than a church. It's the place where most roundeyes go. Not many Nogs. Where are you going to go just in case you're not here when Mass finishes?"

"I dunno. I'll just wander around a bit."

However Donkey sensed that Ned really didn't want to be alone at all. "Look, why don't you come in with me. We can sit up the back if you like."

"I dunno," Ned muttered nervously, "though I have seen everything around here at least twice."

"Come on then. The priest won't bite — and you don't have to buy Saigon teas for the nuns either."

Ned laughed. "Then let's go." He followed Donkey into the church. He sat nervously throughout the Mass, staring this way and that, fiddling constantly with his beret, twisting it in his small hands. The only time he was attentive was during the sermon.

At the conclusion of the Mass, the congregation hurried out and went about their business. It was so strange, Donkey thought, the difference between this congregation and that at an ex-pat American Baptist service the Padre had dragged him along to a few weeks previously. Very warm-hearted and friendly people, they had insisted he and the Padre stay for a cup of tea, cakes and a chat.

How different his own Catholic congregation. He felt a little ashamed. It would have been nice to show Ned that there really were some nice, genuine people in the world. Ned certainly didn't believe there were, simply because he'd never seen any.

"You know," Ned reflected as they walked away from the church, "I was sitting in there trying to work out the last time I went to Mass . . ."

"Eh? I didn't know you were a Mick! I thought you said you were a Jew?"

"No, I never said that. I said I had a Polish father and a Jewish mother. And there's more Pole than Jew. So I was brought up a Catholic, in the old country, anyway."

"Well, I'll go to buggery."

"Don't blaspheme. You've just been to Mass, remember. I reckon I must have been about 12 or 13 when I last saw the inside of a church. They all look the same, don't they."

"S'pose they do, in a way. Altar, same statues, that bloke hanging around on a cross wasting Easter."

Ned laughed. "Sin-ny-cal."

"No, just a tasteless joke." Donkey regretted he'd said it. Ned ignored him. His mind was switched to another track. "You know what I can't understand . . . no, wait, that sermon, that padre . . ."

"Priest."

"Priest then. No matter. He was raving on about love thy neighbor and all that crap. Where's he been for the past few years . . . centuries maybe. Locked in his bloody church? Jesus, hasn't — or can't he — see what's going on all around his church?"

"It's not as simple as that, mate."

"Bullets are pal. Bombs are. Rockets are. Shells are. You cop one and it's real simple. You're dead. Thou shalt not kill, that's how it goes, doesn't it? Zap! You're dead. An' sorry 'bout dat. Fucking crazy."

"Yeah, but hang on . . ."

"No, you hang on! *Bless me father, for I have sinned*. Jeez, I can still remember it. *I have just brassed up twenty five Nogs, father, and I beg the Lord's forgiveness. Say six Hail Marys, son. Now, I absolve you in the name of the Father . . ."*

"Cut it out!"

"I wish we could. We could all go home."

"It's not worth arguing about." There was a simplistic, disturbing logic in what Ned had said. Donkey didn't want to think about it. There was too damn much to think about these days. Everything seemed crazy — as Ned had said — all fucked up. Thinking just spun your brain in ever decreasing circles "until your head disappears up your own arse'ole" he mumbled. There were never any answers. "Come on, we're near the river. Let's wander down there and watch the turds float past."

The conversation had dampened their spirits. The sight of the river did nothing to help.

"Have a look at that," Donkey mused. "You non-Victorians sling muck at us about the Yarra floating upside down. If that's so, what do you call that!"

The Saigon River was so filthy it was a gangrenous green color. It was the city's cesspit, sewer, garbage dump. During the wet season the monsoonal rains would flush the city — straight into the river. It stank. During the dry season it became choked with stinking, rotting refuse and excreta, animal and human. It stank worse.

The thing that astounded both Donkey and Ned was the number of people

who lived on the river, who used it to earn their living. How anybody could live on such a cesspool they found amazing.

They wandered until they came to a large floating restaurant, connected to the shore by two long, rickety, wooden gangplanks. It had been bombed during Tet — with more than 100 lives lost — and despite being rebuilt, it still showed many scars.

The bomb itself didn't claim all the lives. The resultant fire did, because people couldn't get off the boat quickly enough. The concession to the tragedy was the laying of the second gangplank.

"If they have another bombing now, they'll probably lose only fifty lives and be quite pleased about it," Donkey observed.

"Ah, forget the bombs. Let's go and get something to eat. It's supposed to be okay, this place."

They went aboard, bought two local beers and ordered a fried rice dish which was served quickly. Donkey poked at it suspiciously. He didn't like the look of it. It seemed to have bits and pieces of all sorts of things in it.

"What's this, do you reckon, meat?"

"Looks like it. Pork, probably."

"It wouldn't be bow-wow, would it?"

"Bow what?"

"Bow-wow. Rover. Bloody dog, you dickhead!"

"Buggered if I know. Taste it."

"You first."

"Jeez, you're a weak gutted bastard Donkey. And how the bloody hell would I know anyway? You're not the only bastard who's never eaten puppy-dog." Nevertheless, Ned selected a piece of the suspect food. He chewed it. "Pork," he declared.

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm not fucking sure! For crying out loud Donkey, I thought you were the one who was hungry? Just eat the bloody stuff. It might poison you but it won't kill you. Might even give you a couple of days off in bed."

"Thanks. You'd smuggle in Fabulous Fanny to share it with me too, wouldn't you."

"Not bloody likely, mate, she's my girl."

"That's what a thousand and one other blokes are saying."

"She's got to earn a living. Anyway, what would you do with Fanny? You're staying clean and virginal for your bride, remember? Or are you

starting to see sense and changing your mind?"

"It's bloody hard at times, I must admit," sighed Donkey, "especially when your mate comes home with lurid tales of his sexual deviations. It's been six months."

"Six months! Won't be long now before you go troppo, old fella."

Ned turned his attention to his rice and ate heartily while Donkey picked through his, avoiding the meat. He finished his beer and stood up.

"I'm sick of this. Let's get out of here. This place stinks."

"What are we going to do? It's only two o'clock."

"I dunno. But let's get off this boat or restaurant or whatever it is — a stinking dump, that's it — before a bloody Charlie sees us and wants to play catchy with a live grenade."

"Back on the bombs, are we. Troppo within a week I reckon."

Donkey suddenly sat bolt upright. "Hey, I've got a great idea! Why don't we con ourselves into the I House? Now that would be the perfect way to spend a pleasant Sunday afternoon."

"Gee, I dunno. It sounds a bit posh for knockabout Ned."

"Yes, you have a point there, I s'pose. You'll have to behave yourself — if you know how. And no groping the roundeye sheilas either or you'll be out on your ear!"

"And we'd have to con our way in?"

"Yeah, easy! Like I told you I had to do the other night. You ought to be able to manage that all right. You've been playing Septics for suckers ever since you've been here."

"Yeah, but not senior officers or civvies."

"Just don't, for Christ's sake, try to sell them any kangaroo feathers. Forget 'de bizzinezz' for just one day and we might even get to go back there again. And mate, I want to go back there again. So don't stuff it up."

Ned agreed, reluctantly, to give it a go. "Don't suppose we have much to lose."

"Exactly!"

The same con worked perfectly again for both of them. Donkey went in first and Ned was signed in three minutes later. Donkey showed him around the place before heading up to the piano bar. Ned was speechless. He kept looking around, wide-eyed.

The bar was about half-full and Tom Logan was crooning away gently at his grand piano. Donkey waved to him and bought two bottles of Heineken.

He motioned Ned to two vacant stools up at the piano bar. They sat down. Logan finished crooning that *"everybody loves somebody some time"* and pushed his microphone away. He turned to Donkey and Ned.

"Hey there Arzzie, how'd ya be Dar-nkey?"

"Right, Tom. This here's me mate Ned." Donkey looked around the bar. "He's impressed too."

"Jest about everybody is, even us 'Mericans. Home away from home in the middle of the biggest arseholing place on earth . . ."

Logan was interrupted by a broad-grinned countryman. "Pardon me, ah don't want to butt in, but you guys Arzzies?" Donkey nodded. "Y'are? Hey, how 'bout that!" He turned back to his mates. "Hey you guys, carmon over 'an meet a coupla Arzzies!"

Donkey winked at Ned, whispering: "Rart on coo, ol' buddy. Here come de free piss fo' de res' o' de afternoo'!"

They rolled out the door at 2000 hours, blind drunk, clinging to one another for support until they fell into a taxi. All the way back to the Canberra Ned did his impersonation of Sinatra while Donkey slurred through a medley of Dean Martin. Such was the racket when the taxi pulled up out the front that the guards almost put two magazines of automatic rifle fire through the cab. They crawled into the hotel, up the stairs to their room, still singing. Silence came only when they collapsed on to their beds.

The next morning Donkey thought it was the worst hangover he had ever had in his life. He couldn't move, his head throbbed so much. Ned was making coffee and grinning broadly.

"God it hurts! I can't go to work today. Tell my boss I'm crook, would you Ned?"

Ned agreed. "Troppo within a week, no sweat." He picked up his rifle and left Donkey to his misery. "Fucking percolator," he muttered, "can't you boil just once before the bus comes?"

A couple of hours and several disprin later Donkey felt semi-human again. His head had managed to clear the pick-wielding leprechauns and he decided he was fit enough to go to work.

But as he walked past Errington's room, he noticed the door was ajar. Odd, he thought, for mid-morning. Everybody locked their rooms when they went to work although the maids who cleaned them had keys. He pushed the door open and Errington jumped and spun round.

"Shit! You frightened the life out of me, Donk."

“Sorry mate, I saw your door open and thought it a bit odd so I just came to check for you.” Donkey saw that he had caught Errington in the process of stuffing civilian clothes into an overnight bag. He waved his hand towards the bag. “You got the day off?”

Errington stumbled. “Ah, yeah, yeah, that’s it. Going to visit some Vietnamese friends for the day. They’re taking me out somewhere. Need civvies, they said.”

“Vietnamese friends? ”

“Part of the job, you idiot.” Errington had recovered his composure. “Look, when you get to know these people, as I have taken the trouble to do, they’re very nice. A hell of a lot smarter, cultured, sophisticated and selfless than you will ever dream.”

“Bullshit.”

“Ok, have it your own way.” He turned back to his packing.

“Have a nice day,” Donkey smirked and headed for the street to catch a taxi. Fancy going out for the day with a bunch of Nogs, he thought. And where? Bit hard to have a picnic in the park around this place without being shot at.

Donkey expected a serve from the boss when he arrived at work but he was lucky. Colonel Pace was out for the day and had taken Jilly with him. The power was off and Bassett, Hillingham and Longhurst were moping around sweating heavily while the Padre was writing letters. No-one had felt like going out for lunch so they had collected food from the Free World Mess and taken it back to the office. It had been barely edible but at least it was free.

Bassett snorted at Donkey’s vow to never drink again. "Never again! Ha! Back to the milk for the country boy! Except there's no live cows around here for you to milk."

Donkey went along with the gag, not that he had much choice. "Ahh! What I would give now for some nice, warm milk straight from the udder."

"You can't milk a cow, Donkey," Hillingham sneered, "you said you come from a country town."

"Right. But I can milk a cow. When I was a kid I lived on a real farm."

Hillingham was fiddling with a rubber glove the photographers used to protect their hands from photographic printing chemicals. "I wonder," he muttered. He grabbed a pin from the Padre's desk and pierced the tips of the glove's two longest fingers. He then went over to the fridge, filled the glove

with milk and held it out to Donkey.

"Right, country boy, show us how to milk a cow." His challenge was met with wide grins of approval. This was going to be fun.

"Nah, I know how to do it, it's you blokes who want to learn apparently. Go on Bernie, you have a go. I'll bet you blokes can't get milk from that glove."

Bernie Longhurst took up the challenge with relish — and a two dollar bet. With Hillingham holding the glove aloft, closing off the open wrist so the milk wouldn't spill, Longhurst went to work. He gripped the two milk-laden fingers and squeezed. Nothing happened. Try as he might, he could not get milk to squirt from the two pinpricks in the glove's fingers. He couldn't believe it. Bassett, Hillingham and the Padre stood back cackling.

"Here, give me a go!" Bassett demanded, "I'll get that bloody cow to give milk if I have to kick shit out of it!"

"Two bucks," said Donkey, beginning to enjoy the ineptitude of his city cousins.

Bassett failed too. "The bloody holes aren't big enough. Are you sure they're through, Mat?"

"There's nothing wrong with the holes," chipped Donkey. "You bloody city slickers are just fucking hopeless. There's a trick to it, you know."

"Right-oh smart-arse country boy, show us how to milk the cow."

Donkey grabbed the two fingers and aimed them straight at the smirking Bassett who didn't move. There was no way known, he thought, that Donkey was going to get milk out of that glove.

Donkey hit him fair and square in the chest with two long, strong spurts of milk. Bassett jumped back in astonishment, cursing. Longhurst and the Padre collapsed on to the Padre's desk, shrieking with laughter. Hillingham, who was still holding the glove, staggered back against a wall, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Donkey turned his teats on to the Padre and Longhurst, and using the hand milking technique he'd learned as a kid, fired two staccato bursts on to their nose and chest respectively. They rolled on to the floor, hooting wildly, trying to avoid the streams of machine-gun milk as it sprayed about the room, catching Bassett too, now on the floor holding his stomach. Hillingham slid down the wall, shaking with laughter, still holding the "magazine" aloft while Donkey went down with him, firing from the teats at his rolling, shuddering targets until the glove emptied. He reserved the last burst for Hillingham. At

point blank range he turned the teats backwards and hit him right in the left eye . . . one, two!

"You're all dead," he gasped, looking around proudly at his bodycount. His corpses were helpless, hooting, whooping and crying with laughter. Hillingham recovered first, wiping milk from his eyes.

"How did you do that?"

"I told you, there's a trick to it."

"Well show us how you do it," said Bassett, moaning with barely controlled mirth. Donkey could see that his stocks had risen immeasurably, simply because he could milk a rubber glove. Bloody crazy, he thought, we're all going troppo.

"All you have to do is dig your fingertips into the teat — and squeeze. You blokes all made the mistake of wrapping your fingers around it. You'll never get milk that way."

Hillingham refilled the glove and Bassett had another go, this time producing a dribble of milk. He was delighted, like a kid with a new toy. Eventually he got the hang of it, as did the others on their turn. Another glove was produced and a two-team war started. One man would hold the glove aloft while the other fired, just like a machine-gun team. Back and forth they charged and chased, from one office to the other, firing wildly. Donkey was by far the best shot and he could still get more out of a teat than the others.

Everybody became soaked in sticky milk, as did the floor and walls, typewriters and files. After an hour two one-litre cartons had been emptied, their contents staining every corner of the PR offices. Ammunition exhausted, themselves panting, they sat down to get their breath back and surveyed the battleground.

"Bloody hell, it's a bit of a mess, isn't it," observed Bassett.

"The Noggies will clean it up," said Longhurst.

"Look, the heat's dried up most of it already," said Hillingham, pointing to the floor. But it had mixed with the dirt and left sticky stains everywhere.

"Jeez, what if the boss comes back this afternoon and sees this," said Donkey.

"He won't be back. He's out at some Septic piss-up. Ha! That was bloody good fun," grinned Longhurst.

"We'd better clean up the worst of it. The walls, anyway," said Bassett. As the most senior of the four, it would be his arse which copped the first kicking if the boss did come back.

He didn't. But the next morning, as the colonel sat down at his desk, far from well, he sniffed the air suspiciously.

"God, what's that awful smell?"

His staff looked at one another. They too had smelt it when they had come into work.

"Just the normal Noggie smell, sir, just a bit worse than usual this morning," sniffed Bassett authoritatively.

"No, not that smell. It's like . . ." He sniffed the air again. "like . . . sort of . . . sour milk. Yes, that's it, milk that's off."

"Yes, you're right sir," volunteered Donkey, sniffing vigorously, "it's just like the smell in the dairy back home, as a matter of fact sir."

Colonel Pace snorted.

"We did have a cow of a day yesterday boss," said Bassett, grinning, "but we managed to wade our way through the bullshit."

"Pack of punny bastards this morning, aren't we," the colonel sneered. "Get on with your work! I'll have to speak to those damn cleaners, this is not good enough." He grinned suddenly. "Steer them in the right direction." Not bad! he smirked to himself, not bad at all!

***

Errington and Natasha spent the greater part of the day wandering around what was left of the cultural heritage of the Pearl of the Orient. Despite war damage, Errington could see why Saigon had earned the sobriquet. So many cultures had contributed to building beautiful things, yet those same, and others, had torn down so much of it, like toys flung aside and smashed by a recalcitrant child in a fit of temper. Replaced by refugee camps, crammed with the human debris of war which rotted into the poisoned ground in despair and hopelessness, sowing seeds of hate. *Sin Loi.*

The experience saddened them and when they returned to Natasha’s flat they were subdued in their love making. After, they lay side by side, naked, deep in their own thoughts, the fan overhead giving little relief in the stifling, humid heat of the late afternoon. Errington turned his head and gazed at Natasha in open admiration. “My pearl in the Pearl of the Orient,” he said. “There is but one pearl, one very beautiful pearl, in this city, and it is my Natasha.” And suddenly it dawned on him that he was in love.

She giggled, rolled towards him and lay her head on his chest.

“I love you Natasha.” He said it with such sincerity that it startled her. She had heard those words so many times before, just words, usually before a

man buried himself inside her, intent only on self satisfaction. She accepted it as part of the game. But this time it was like an arrow going into her very being, frightening her. She'd never felt like this before, so . . . so . . . what was it? Exhilarated! Yes, that was it! And then the fear swamped her again, her instincts born on the streets flashing danger signals. She changed the subject.

"If your name John, why your friends call you Charlie?"

Errington sighed and rolled on to his back, putting his hands under his head. He hesitated for a moment then thought, what the hell . . . "because they reckon I'm a Noggie lover, you know, that by having some respect for Vietnamese, by trying to understand, I'm a VC sympathiser."

She screwed up her nose and looked at him quizzically. "But that silly."

"Of course it's silly. You see the problem is they simply don't understand, and don't want to try to understand, fear of the unknown in many ways. It's not really their fault. They see things and in their ignorance they interpret them wrongly, fearfully even; one thing leads to another and before you know it . . . well, it's easy for hatred to fester in this environment, you know that."

He told her about the day he, Harding and Donkey had spent touring the devastated parts of the city after the May offensive; about Harding's insensitivity towards the mamasan, how Donkey had made something of an effort to listen to his viewpoint.

"Funny name, Donkey," she giggled.

"Yeah, I suppose it is," he grinned, "but he's not a bad sort of a bloke." He sighed loudly, thinking back to other things. "Poor bastard."

"Why he poor bastard?"

"Boy, has he got a job to do. Hanoi beware the simple Aussie ass," Errington reflected pensively.

"What you mean?" Natasha's antenna was suddenly fully alert.

"Never mind. I shouldn't have said that. It's nothing."

Natasha had to force herself not to pursue her curiosity as Errington turned his head on to her right breast, arousing her again. Her mind raced, trying to unravel this new mystery, but Errington's tongue on her nipple distracted her. *I must know, I must watch this Donkey*, her instincts warned her before she moaned softly and gave herself to her lover. That startled her too. She wasn't acting, she was enjoying.

***

"Another day successfully searched and destroyed," grinned Bassett as he and Donkey made their way to the I House that night in search of the elusive roundeyes.

The taxi pulled up near the I House. "Ah, the land of milk and honey. Honey being the roundeye and milk, of course, the free piss. Let's go, country boy, and squeeze a few Septic tits and teats."

"Metaphorically speaking."

"Only in regard to the teats."

There wasn't one lonesome roundeye sheila in the entire building. Bassett sat morosely at the piano bar sipping his Heineken as Tom Logan crooned softly, his fingers lazily caressing the keyboard.

"Where's the skirt, Tom?" Bassett moaned. "When I was here a couple of weeks ago there seemed to be plenty around."

"Comes and goes. Your timing must be off old buddy. There was a group of nurses in here last night."

"Bloody hell. The old 'you-should-have-been-here-last-night' routine." Bassett was worried about his timing, it had never been this poor before. Maybe he was losing his touch.

"Hey, pardon me, but are you guys Arzzies?" Bassett looked around. Ah well, he thought, at least the free piss is still on.

They were both about 30, dressed in civilian clothes and gushing with American hospitality. They insisted on shouting and got only token argument.

"Pooftas," hissed Bassett in Donkey's ear as soon as he could do so without attracting attention. Donkey hadn't noticed. He was, after all, a country boy.

"Yeah?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "Shit! Let's get the fuck out of here."

"Not as long as they got money, old mate."

"I don't want to drink with bloody pooftas!"

"Their money's as good as anyone else's — and better to use theirs than ours, country boy."

"Well I don't like it. If they put the hard word on me I'll snot the bastards!"

"Cool it!" Bassett whispered. "We'll drink these bastards under the table."

As Logan swung into another bracket of numbers the Australians and their new found friends were soon joined by a crowd. Bassett and Donkey joined in the crooning. Both had reasonably good voices and soon attracted Logan's attention.

"Hey Fred, Darnkey, how about an Arzzie number?"

His suggestion was followed by a chorus of agreement from around the piano bar.

Donkey and Fred looked at one another. "Suppose we could start with *Waltzing Matilda*," suggested Donkey. "You know the tune, Tom?"

"No, but you guys sing along and I'll pick it up quick enough."

He did, too, and by the time Donkey and Fred had sung three encores, the Americans had picked up the chorus and were singing along lustily, enjoying every moment.

"Hey," said Tom, "you guys are a hit! You can join in any time! Now how about another?"

Pete and Rodney were hugely impressed with the two Arzzies they had adopted. They introduced Donkey and Fred to everyone around the bar, beaming broadly. Pete bought them a martini each.

"What's this?" asked Donkey. He eyed the clear, watery drink suspiciously, especially the green, berry-like thing with the red ends on a toothpick in the bottom of the glass.

"It's a martini, country boy," chastised Bassett.

"I don't think I want it, whatever it is," sniffed Donkey. "I'll stick to beer, mate."

"C'mon man," said Rodney. "That is our national drink. Just sip it, man, it's great."

Donkey took a tentative gulp. It burned all the way down. He gasped and began coughing. "Bloody hell!" he managed between coughs. The Americans thought that was hilarious. Donkey thought it was poisonous.

They lurched into *The Wild Colonial Boy*, helping each other through the words they had forgotten. The Septics loved that, too. Then Bassett did Danny Boy solo, while Donkey gulped at his martini. Once it's out of the way, he thought, I can get back to a beer. But no sooner had he drunk it than another martini appeared in front of him.

Danny Boy brought tears to the eyes of the sentimental Septics. And Bassett got a standing ovation. "More! More!" they cried.

"What do we do now?" wondered Bassett.

"What about *Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport*?"

"Hey, yeah! And why don't we act it out as well? I'll jump up on the bar and be the dying stockman. What do you reckon?"

"Right. Let's go." Bassett turned to the audience which had now grown

from half a dozen to more than fifty. But being an old radio ham from way back, it was just up his alley. He leaned across the bar and took Tom's mike.

"Now ladies and gentlemen, the song we are about to do for you is an old Australian bush ballad about a stockman — or cowboy in your language. Listen to the words carefully and you'll soon pick up the story. And could you clear your drinks there from the piano bar because we are going to need that space. Thank you."

Donkey and Fred jumped up on to the bar, Fred kneeling, Donkey laying along it with his head in Fred's lap. And away they went.

There's an old Australian stockman,
lying, dying.
And he gets himself up on to one elbow
and he turns to his mates who are gathered
around in the International House Club and he says:
Watch me wallaby's feed, mate,
Watch me wallaby's feed.
They're a dangerous breed, mate,
so watch me wallaby's feed.
All together now:
Tie me kangaroo down, sport,
Tie me kangaroo down.
Tie me kangaroo down, sport,
Tie me kangaroo down.

Tom picked up the simple tune quickly and just as quickly the audience picked up the verse. Soon the piano bar was rocking to an American twang version of *Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport* whenever the chorus came around. Such was the noise during the chorus and silence during the verses as Donkey wailed about his platypus duck, koala and various other animals that needed tender loving care, that it attracted the curiosity of even more people from the dining room and the downstairs bars. They pushed and shoved their way into the piano bar to join the party.

Donkey was fading fast . . .

"Tan me 'ide when I'm dead, Fred,
Tan me 'ide when I'm dead . . ."

And Donkey died, his head flopping down on to Bassett's lap. There was stunned silence, as Fred drew out the suspense, grieving . . . "no, not me old mate, no . . ." He suddenly snapped his head up and roared:

"So they tanned his hide when 'e died, Clyde.
An' that's it 'anging on the shed!"

Donkey jumped back to life, waved his arms in the air and shouted: "All together now . . .

Tie me kangaroo down sport,
Tie me kangaroo down!
Tie me kangaroo down, Sport,
Tie me kangaroo doooowwwwwnnnnnn!"

The Americans were stunned. Suddenly they began clapping, cheering, stomping their feet and whistling. A shout of 'Encore!' was quickly taken up and gathered into a swelling chorus.

Donkey reached for his martini.

"Have a look at that!" he gasped to Bassett, tipping half the martini down his dry throat. "I thought you once told me that if you farted in this place they'd throw you out."

"I think we'd better do it again or we will be thrown out," said Bassett.

"Jeez, I wish somebody would buy me a beer instead of this martini shit. Though I must admit that second one wasn't as bad as the first." No sooner had he spoken than a third martini was thrust into his hand.

"Ah well," he sighed, "beggars can't be choosers, I suppose. Up the old red Rooster." The martini disappeared in one swallow. "Hey, that one wasn't bad at all. Must be making them a bit weaker now. Bloody barmen are the same the world over."

They did *Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport* again and it brought the house down once again. They followed with *My Boomerang Won't Come Back* and a repeated version of *Waltzing Matilda* that went for ten minutes. The Americans wouldn't let them stop. They joined in lustily during the choruses while Donkey and Bassett soothed parched throats. The martinis just kept coming.

Donkey looked at his watch and almost choked. "Hey, look, it's nine thirty! We've got to get back before the curfew comes down at ten. Let's go!"

They stumbled through the throng, repeating "curfew, curfew" to query after query as to where they were going. They grabbed their rifles from the armoury and flew into the street looking for a taxi.

Donkey suddenly found he couldn't stand up. He was paralytic. Bassett bundled him into a taxi and shut the door. He ran around the back of the cab and jumped in the other side, telling the driver to hurry by pointing to his

watch.

Donkey was mumbling unintelligibly. For awhile this amused Bassett. Donkey must have drunk at least six martinis, Bassett thought. And the way he was throwing them down! He'll sip them next time. Bassett grinned broadly.

Donkey's mumblings had begun to increase in volume as the taxi fought its way through the last-minute, pre-curfew traffic rush. Suddenly he screamed.

"Get outta the way you fuckin' Nogs!"

He began fumbling with his rifle, trying to pull it up from between his legs.

"I'll shift ya, ya bastards, I'll fuckin' shift ya!" he was screaming, jerking at the rifle. He managed to get it up to his shoulder, the barrel pointing out the front passenger window. Bassett was almost too late. What he had thought to be a simple prank was something far more serious. The taxi driver was terrified. Bassett wrenched the rifle from Donkey's hands just as he was about to cock it.

"Settle down Donkey, for Christ's sake! You'll get us shot!"

"Shot? Shot?" Donkey's eyes were rolling. "It's me that's gunna do the shooting. These fucking Nogs! Just shit! Gimme back the rifle. Let's have a gook-shoot! C'mon, gimme the rifle Bassett!"

"You've flipped! Sit back!" Bassett knocked Donkey's hands from the rifle and snarled. "Calm down you crazy bastard or I'll smash your fucking teeth in!"

Donkey fell back in his seat, shocked that his best mate should speak to him so sharply.

"Watsamadder with you? I only want to shoot a Nog. A useless, shit Nog. Wadareya? A fuckin' Noggie lover?"

"Settle down Donkey or you'll get that bunch of fives!"

Bassett decided to try to change the subject. "We brought the house down, mate!"

Donkey looked at him sideways, the mad shine in his eyes glazing over. Bassett began to sing *Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport* but Donkey couldn't hear him. He'd passed out.

***

It had taken quite a few days for Errington to get the timing just right, but eventually everything worked in his favor.

Colonel Pace had gone to lunch around midday and the others had agreed that they would all go out to the Plaza Hotel for their meal. They left the

building shortly after and Errington made his move.

He rushed into the PR offices with a Top Secret file tucked under his left arm. Jilly was seated at her desk about to open a rice dish she had prepared that morning.

"Morning Jilly, is the colonel in?"

"No, you've just missed him. He's gone to lunch already."

"Damn! Oh well, after lunch will do, I suppose." He waved the file under Jilly's nose. "I'll drop this in his in-tray. The general wanted him to look it over."

The file, Jilly could see, was marked Operation Santa Claus. It was a red-banded Top Secret document.

Errington walked into the colonel's inner office, dumped the file in his in-tray then walked out, smiling broadly. "How's it going down here, Jilly?"

"Oh, okay, okay," she tittered back to him.

As soon as Errington's footsteps had disappeared down the stairs outside, Jilly rushed into the colonel's office and grabbed the file. She couldn't believe her luck. Such carelessness! She flicked it open. The file contained only two sheets of paper, both stamped Top Secret. What she read made her hair stand on end.

CHAPTER 16

Donkey swore he'd never drink another martini. Apart from being as crook as a dog the next day, he had been badly frightened by what he had done, or tried to do. Of course, he hadn't remembered a thing. Bassett had told him in no uncertain terms the following day.

What in the world had made him do such a thing? Sure, the martinis had certainly had something to do with it, but was there something else as well? Was Ned right? Was he going troppo?

Apart from the fear something was happening to him that he couldn't understand, he was also deeply embarrassed. Bassett had told the world about "the night Donkey went on a gook shoot".

His thoughts flashed guiltily back to the time when that American general — what was his name? Cowboy, yes, that was it, Cowboy Cassidy — had swaggered into Melville-Smith's office sporting pearl-handled Colt 45s slung low on both hips and a huge Cuban cigar jammed into the corner of his mouth. He was loud and vulgar. The archetypal Ugly American. He had invited Melville-Smith to come with him for a 'gook shoot' in his command chopper, a Cobra gunship.

"We'll just sit up there in ma ship an' have ourselves a good time — jus' shootin' 'em down as they run," he had drawled.

Like rats. Donkey had been amazed, naively so, he thought now. *All's fair in love and war* was certainly more than an empty cliche. It was for real. To his credit in Donkey’s estimation, Melville-Smith had declined graciously. He had another appointment, he'd said.

At least I was out of my mind temporarily when I went on my gook shoot, Donkey thought. The Septic general seemed to have made madness a permanent and personal attachment, and revelled in it.

Still, the comparison was there. No matter how much it hurt, it bore thinking about and for three days he did just that, tearing his guts apart. He kept to himself, drank nothing, wrote letters, studied his shorthand without absorbing one character. No longer could he see, didn't want to see, the lighter side of the usually ludicrous situations which arose every day. His mind, which appeared to be in neutral, was far from it. It buzzed incessantly. Questions, questions, questions. And not one answer.

On September 30 he had served six months in country and although that cheered him a little because he was now on the downhill run, the prospect of having another six months to go deepened his depression. Classic Catch 22.

Allison had begun to pester him about setting a date for their wedding when he returned home. That, he tried to explain, was almost impossible.

They can give me a definite date of my RTA 'on a temporary basis subject to change at any time'. Now that's brilliant, isn't it! If we do settle on a date everything might turn out all right. On the other hand it might not and I just don't trust the Army. It seems to have something against me. Everything that seems likely to be in my favor gets mucked up.

Another reason which makes me hesitant is more difficult to explain. It may seem strange to you but after being up here for six months I'm sure that Australia will seem very strange after this hell-hole. I just can't see myself settling down quickly enough to jump straight into a wedding. I'm certainly looking forward to civilisation again and a nice long rest.

I suppose this country has changed me in a lot of ways. I sometimes think I have become a lot more sarcastic, cynical and radically minded. Maybe I've just matured a little — for the better, I hope. On the other hand, Ned reckons I'm going troppo. Sometimes I think he just might be right.

And there was another reason he didn't mention: Jilly. The lecherous dreams he used to have about Allison had switched their focus to Jilly and he didn't know how to handle it. He was confused, he felt as though he was being pulled in one hundred different directions at once, by one hundred different strings, all being controlled by one hundred different people. He was ready to explode.

Ned certainly viewed Donkey's mood with some alarm. He knew that unless he snapped Donkey out of it . . . well, it didn't bear thinking about. He formed a plan and swung into action.

"Hey Donkey, did you know there's a bar just around the corner from the Canberra?"

"Nup." Donkey's answer was flat, disinterested. He had his head buried in his shorthand books.

"Well there is. One of the blokes from Headquarters Company found it the other day and told me about it. Good sheilas, too, he reckons."

"Mmm."

"I reckon I might go around there and investigate tonight. Wanna come?"

"Nup."

"Car-mon mate, I can't go there by myself. It's in a back alley and you never know what's in back alleys in Cholon. Together we'd be all right."

"I've got to do this shorthand."

"You've been flogging yourself to death on that lately. Give yourself a break. Anyway, you owe me one."

"Owe you what?"

"Remember I went to your precious Mass with you, didn't I, when you asked me."

"Yeah, but that was different. You want me to go to a knockshop!"

"Principle's the same. I'm callin' in a favor."

"Jesus, Ned, you're fucking outrageous!" Donkey leaned back from his books and sighed. "All right, but only because, as you seem to claim, I owe you one. And only the one bar, this one around the corner. No more. If it's shithouse we'll come back home. Right?"

Ned agreed.

Unlike other bars, this one didn't advertise its wares in bright flashing neon outside. It was just a door in a narrow street which lead immediately to a flight of dim stairs. The bar itself was smaller than most but with the same jukebox music, the same painted Asian whores looking incongruous in western clothes, low-cut blouses and micro mini-skirts.

Within seconds they were swamped. Ned took his pick of the bunch while Donkey snapped a vicious “didi mau” to ensure the girls got the message. In turn they abused him, called him Numbah Tennnn and went back to their squabbling around the bar. They bought some Coke to mix with the contents of a bottle of bourbon they had brought with them and settled back for a solid night. They talked shop, Ned flicking concentration between Donkey and the girl on his knee.

It wasn’t so bad, Donkey thought. Ned had been right, he did need to get out and relax a bit. Then he noticed her. She was dressed in a traditional Ao Dai, unlike the other girls, and was stunningly beautiful. How had he missed her earlier? Was the bourbon working that well, already? She looked like a daughter of a French-Vietnamese coupling which seemed to produce extraordinary beauty. He caught her eye and beckoned her over. She shook her head. Donkey couldn't believe it. A bar girl knocking back Saigon teas!

She spent most of her time helping behind the bar, leaving it only to deliver cups of tea to the other girls and drinks to customers before retreating again.

It was his shout. But instead of calling for more colas he got up and went to the bar himself. The girl smiled at him as he approached. His hopes leapt.

"Two Cokes and a tea for the beautiful lady here," he ordered.

The girl thanked him with a smile and accepted the tea. Her smile was broad, but shy. She kept her eyes downcast, her ebony hair falling both sides of her face, keeping it in shadow.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Susie."

Susie. Somehow that just didn't fit. He asked what her Vietnamese name was. She told him but he couldn't understand a word of it. He tried a new tack. "What does it mean?"

As she raised her eyes to answer him he noticed their sparkle, the unusual straightness of her nose and natural eyebrows, only lightly plucked, and not painted. Her lips were pink, thin almost compared to many of her sisters, and finely sculptured, like Cupid's bow. "Little flower," she murmured, flashing her teeth.

"It's a beautiful name for a beautiful girl."

"Thank you."

"Would you care to join me?"

"Mebbe later."

"Why later? Why not now?"

"No, I work now. Mebbe later."

Blown it! thought Donkey. And she's so bloody gorgeous! Little Flower. How I'd like to de-flower that little flower! Hey, hang on, if I jumped in the cot with her, it would be her de-flowering me! And suddenly he realised that was exactly what he wanted. Tonight mate, you're going to get it! If not with her, then another one. It really doesn't matter! "Okay, later. You no forget now!"

Donkey returned to the bench where Ned was groping luxuriously. He called another bar girl over and joined in the sport.

Curfew time came and went. It didn't matter. Both Donkey and Ned had decided they weren't going home tonight. They had arranged their girls and beds for twenty five bucks each but the girls had no intention of going to bed until the bar closed — there was too much money to be made on Saigon teas first.

Around midnight the bar owner indicated he was shutting down. Donkey was disappointed. The girl he had would do, but how much better would the

beauty be, his Little Flower. She hadn't come near him all night.

Just when Donkey had resigned himself to his second choice — the bourbon had improved her appearance dramatically over the past couple of hours — he felt a light tapping on his shoulder. He turned. It was Little Flower.

"Come," she said.

Apart from pouting, Donkey's other girl untangled herself from his lap and made no objection. She melted away. Donkey followed Little Flower.

"Hey, wait for me!" Ned shouted.

There were two beds in the room. Ned went straight to work, inhibitions the furthermost thing from his mind.

Donkey was full of them — and Little Flower knew it immediately. "First time?"

Donkey was startled. "How did you know that?"

She just smiled and began unbuttoning his shirt. "I give you numbah wahn boom-boom, first time Uc Dai Loi."

She did too. Twice, in fact. The first time was a bit of a failure, Donkey thought. He'd been too quick. But Little Flower stroked his ego with a hugely exaggerated climax of her own.

“Big boy!” she enthused. “Donkey boom boom like nuke missile! Make Little Flower *explode* inside!” Then, as she had been instructed, she began asking him questions. She found out he was “just a clerk” and said she didn’t believe him. “You bigger man than that!” and giggled, stroking his ego again. She propped herself on one elbow, her perfect breasts only inches from his face. “Me thinks you *big* soldier, *special* soldier, eh?”

“Not this little black duck.”

“Eh? What black duck?” She puckered her eyebrows, not understanding.

He laughed. “Never mind. Come here. More boom boom.”

She squirmed away from him, suddenly pouting. “No! You make fun of me. No boom boom!”

“All right, all right. Have it your own way. I’m a famous soldier, and I’m on a special mission to kill Ho Chi Minh for the CIA. Happy now?”

Little Flower was startled. “You for real?”

“Bloody oath. Now, more boom boom.”

“I no believe!”

“I hope you don’t.”

She ignored him. “How you get to Hanoi?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” Donkey’s loins were hard, demanding. The conversation had become ridiculous. “I’m going to ride a white charger up the Ho Chi Minh Trail dressed in a Santa Claus suit. Now, let’s make love, not war.”

She sensed she had pressed him as far as she dare and rolled back into his arms.

Behind the door Natasha was delighted with her little sister’s work. But surely he hadn’t been serious? She would know as soon as she told General Cassidy. Are we both working for the same side? she wondered.

The second time was pure ecstasy. In fact it was so good Donkey was soon wondering if the third time would be proportionally better.

Little Flower wasn't having any of that. Two for twenty five bucks was good value and she had to work tomorrow.

"Go sleep! No more boom-boom. Go sleep now!"

Donkey did, reluctantly.

Ned woke him at six and as they headed back to the Canberra they compared notes on their girls. Both agreed it was the best twenty five they had ever spent.

Ned was delighted that his ploy had worked. The change in Donkey was remarkable. He was back to his old jovial self.

Arms around one another's shoulders, they walked around the corner towards the hotel, laughing about their loving. Suddenly Donkey stopped.

"Hang on a minute, Ned!"

"What for?"

"I've left something behind."

"What?"

"Me cherry!"

They fell against one another again, chortling loudly.

"That's me old Donkey!" roared Ned.

***

The first sheet was marked "Operation Santa Claus, Phase One". Jilly studied it. The purpose of the operation, it said, was to film Australian Diggers wishing their families a Merry Christmas. That film would then be edited into a one-hour show which would be shown on Australian television on Christmas Day.

The filming would be done by an Australian Army PR camera team which would be arriving soon from Canberra. They would be accompanied throughout their two-week tour of Australian bases in Vietnam by Private Brian Simpson, who would act as record keeper and gofer.

What's so Top Secret about that? Jilly wondered. She turned the page. It was marked Operation Santa Claus, Phase Two and was written in the form of a memo from General Melville-Smith to Colonel Pace. She read on:

"Operation Santa Claus Phase One is a cover for Operation Santa Claus Phase Two, the purpose of which is the assassination of the North Vietnamese leader, Ho Chi Minh.

"The initial phase of this operation will concentrate on specialised training for our proposed agent, Captain Brian Simpson, Special Air Service (SAS). He will be infiltrated into Hanoi as a Russian advisor. You will be advised of further details in due course.

"I expect, colonel, that the arrangements you make for the filming of Christmas messages will completely cover any training environment in which Captain Simpson is required to engage."

Charlie Errington gave Jilly 10 minutes before he walked noisily back into the PR office. He found her busily dusting around the back of the colonel's desk. Good, he surmised, she's read it.

"Whoops," he said, picking up the file from where he'd put it, "shouldn't have left this here, should I. These damn Top Secret files are supposed to be passed from hand to hand. I'd better take it until the colonel gets back."

He turned to walk out of the office, grinning. "I hope you haven't been peeking, Jilly," he joked.

Jilly colored brightly, protesting vehemently, offended that he had even thought she might do such a thing. "No, no Charlie, Jilly no do that! Nev-ahh!"

CHAPTER 17

Ned found the problem of where to garage the Jeep the toughest he had faced in his business career. In a city where millions of people were lucky to have a sheet of beaten tin over their heads to call home, only the very wealthy had such luxuries as garages and they were not in the Canberra's lowly neighbourhood, Cholon. And they certainly couldn't just park it out the front. There was really only one option, and that was to park it openly and boldly with all the other vehicles in the Australian Transport Section at the Free World Building. But there were a couple of snags. The Transport sergeant, Sam Smiley, knew every one of his vehicles. One with US Army written all over it would attract immediate attention and trouble because SS was a surly Regular Army bastard, a stickler for rules and regulations, paperwork in umteenthlicate.

But if he could be won around, somehow . . . parking the Jeep so far away from the Canberra wasn't ideal, of course, but at least it was close to the office and only a short cab trip between the two.

Ned went to work on Sam. He was relying very heavily on the fact that SS considered himself something of a playboy; that he loved nothing better than to spend a night in a girlie-bar. He thought the carrot of offering the sergeant a half share in the Jeep for his forays into the Tu Do Street bars might just swing the deal. And he had a little ace up his sleeve.

"You've got a Jeep? Of your own?" was the sergeant's incredulous first reaction to Ned's story. "Bloody hell! I've been trying for six months to get extra vehicles out of the Yanks and they won't budge. And you tell me you bought one for a few cans?"

"Four dozen, sarge, and a pair of boots," Ned corrected.

"Unbelievable!" SS took off his bush hat and wiped the sweat from his face. The Transport office was a dingy pre-fabricated plywood box in the middle of the parking lot. A 12-inch oscillating fan perched on a chest-high filing cabinet fought a hopeless battle against the thick, heavy air. He plonked his sweat-stained hat back on his head. "Four dozen cans and a pair of boots," he sighed in disbelief.

He looked back up at Ned. "And you want me to look after it for you."

"In return for a half share in its use, sarge."

"What would I want with a Jeep? I've got a yard full of vehicles out there."

"True sarge, but you can't use them for your personal use, can you. Not unless you want to cheat on the log books — and that can be dangerous. Look sarge, just think! If you had your own wheels you could go where you please when you please, no questions asked! No log books to fill in. The best bars in town within easy driving, no more cab fares, no hassles with curfews — it's a military vehicle, remember — you could even shoot down to Vung Tau for a day or two and nobody would be any the wiser. And during the day, when we're not using it or you're not using it you could add it to your fleet here."

The sergeant studied Ned for a moment. "You've got it all figured out, haven't you. What about pet . . ."

"Petrol's right. A full tank whenever we want it."

"You've organised that as well? I've got to go through three thousand forms to get petrol!"

"Not with our Jeep, you won't, sarge."

The sergeant looked at Ned, thinking. The thought of having his own vehicle appealed to him all right. And Ned had made three good points. Curfews wouldn't bother him any more. And he just might get away with an odd trip down to see those luscious girls in Vung Tau. And as for free petrol, well . . .

"All right, what if I go along with you? What do you propose I tell the Transport Officer when he notices we have an extra vehicle? What do I tell my drivers?"

"Nothing until they ask. Then just say it's on loan from the Yanks — that you did a deal. And perhaps you ought to suggest that the fewer questions asked the better. A nod and a wink, that sort of thing."

"I could, of course, simply impound the vehicle and have you charged with possession of stolen goods."

"You could, but what purpose would that serve? Who wins? Nobody. If you come in with us everyone wins and nobody loses."

"Except the poor bloody Yank from whom this Jeep was stolen in the first place."

"Look sarge, you know the Yanks. They've got more gear and equipment than they know what to do with. They wouldn't even know the Jeep is missing." Suddenly Ned changed his tune, looking around conspiratorially.

"Sam, I've got connections in Vung Tau you just wouldn't believe. Not a bar, but a villa. Beautiful it is, right on the beach. And the most luscious birds you've ever seen in your life. All you have to do is get yourself there — and the Jeep will make that easy — and pay for your own booze. I'll tee up the rest. Now that's got to be about the best deal you've ever heard of in your life, eh Sam?"

SS thought about that for a moment. Finally he nodded his head. "Not bad, yeah I'll give you that, not bad at all. But can you deliver?"

Ned played his ace. "And I'll tell you what else I'll do for you. You can have Fabulous Fanny for a night — on me. And I'll guarantee you'll get your end in, as many times as you like. Wanna try me?"

That clinched it, as Ned suspected it would. Fabulous Fanny had always been Sam's first pick of the girls at the Texan Bull. And she was the one who had made him cream his jeans the most. This would be sweet revenge indeed. "Okay Ned, it's a deal — if I get sixty-forty use."

"Oh hang on! It's our Jeep! My offer was fifty-fifty. I reckon that's fair enough."

"Sixty-forty or no deal."

Ned had little option but to agree.

***

Jilly was staggered by what she had read. They're planning to kill Ho Chi Minh! The Australians! And Donkey Simpson, an assassin! Who would have thought! A shiver thrilled her at it slid down her spine. She had known there was something special about Donkey, something about him had attracted her to him, something that had told her to get closer to him.

But what now? What to do? She must tell General Dong immediately! He had been extremely angry the last time she had acted unilaterally, without thinking through her actions. It had been a terrible mistake, almost fatal, to bomb Major Swanker, he had ranted at her. Whatever made her do a thing like that, without orders? Because, she had told him, Swanker made her do dirty things to him, and she didn't need him any more.

That had really set him off. "Dirty things!" he had raved. "Don't need him any more? You're a spy, woman, and if you have to be a whore to be a spy then you do it! And if you don't need him any more, you have someone better?" he had asked slyly. Yes, she had said, and she told him.

He had been apoplectic. "You have abandoned the head of Australian Intelligence for a private soldier? You are no longer of use to me! I will hand you over to General Melville-Smith myself. You are dead!"

She tried to explain herself, to ask him to trust a woman's intuition, to beg, bow, scrape, kowtow to get him to change his mind. She had had to convince him that Donkey was worth pursuing, she *knew* it, she could feel in her bones that she was right.

And so the general had reluctantly agreed to give her one last chance, to try to protect her one more time. In fact, to do anything else would have meant an enormous loss of face for himself and with what he was trying to achieve, that was the last thing he could afford. He had pulled in the drunk off the streets, paraded him in front of Big Al and shot him publicly, not only to protect her, but his own much wider plans.

Now Dong was at once amazed with the news and delighted with his spy. She had been correct, Simpson was the real danger — or in a strange twist of fate, was he really an ally? "You must get more," he had told her. This sort of information, he knew, he could use in any number of ways.

***

Donkey lifted his head from the draft of the story he was reading. "What do you think of it?" asked Bassett.

"Well, I must admit, it's bloody good propaganda." Placing his left hand over his left ear and adopting the basso tones of a radio news reader, Donkey read the story's intro:

This is young Australia talking and fighting. This is the 20-year-old lad next door, or at the next desk, facing his test of courage and manhood.

He dropped his hand and made as though he was blowing a trumpet. "Da dahhh! When you go home you ought to get a job with Movietone News, sarge."

"Don't be so facetious, Private Simpson," admonished Bassett, "the Tortoise and I have put a lot of work into this story."

"Indeed you have. How to explain away twenty six KIA and two hundred and three WIA by really trying." Donkey again adopted his radio voice and read the second paragraph from the story:

It is the same test that his father and grandfathers faced. Listen to what these men say and you'll be sure that the great fighting qualities of the Australian soldier have not been eroded.

Donkey stopped, scratched his ear in puzzlement, pushed his glasses back on his nose and turned to Bassett.

"Hey Fred, do you realise that in the intro you describe our hero as the 20-year-old 'lad' from next door whereas in the second par he and his mates all suddenly become men?"

"Private Simpson," said Bassett loftily, "you haven't been following your propaganda, have you? Don't you realise that's how the Army makes men out of boys? Stick 'em in a firefight. A bit of cordite on the brain does wonders for manhood."

"Hey," Donkey shot back bitterly, "we could write a new Standing Order for the battalions on that basis. Let's see now: Battalions will note that in order to achieve manhood, members must receive a decent bit of cordite on the brain. However those that get a bit of shrapnel on the brain will be considered to have failed the test, not achieved manhood, and they will be parcel posted home, special delivery, in a bag, plastic, green, bodies for the use of, to be Last Posted into their local cemetery by the RSL. Lest We Fucking Forget."

"Now, now Donkey, let's not get facetious again. Just type up the story for the telex. It's got to go out to Canberra today." Bassett returned to his desk and Donkey to the story. He read the third paragraph:

The scene, Fire Support Base Carol, 25 miles north of Saigon, the capital of democracy in Asia . . .

Fire Support Base Carol, Donkey reflected. The scene of one of Australia's biggest firefights and casualty lists in Vietnam. And the most ironic thing about it was that it needn't have happened at all. The area of the fight was way outside Australia's area of responsibility, Phuoc Tuy Province, about fifty miles south-east of Saigon, in Bien Hoa province, where the US marched, backwards and forwards, in an ever decreasing circle of tit-for-rat-a-tat-tat with the VC.

American Intelligence had got word that there was a huge North Vietnamese Regular Army force moving down through Laos and Cambodia with the intention of hitting Saigon hard. For once, the information was spot on. The Yanks decided to cut them off at the pass and as they anticipated it was going to be one helluva firefight, invited their mates along for the 'gook shoot'.

Knowing American military tactical competence had been found severely wanting as long ago as Colonel Custer's Last Stand and that it had improved

little since, Melville-Smith had grave doubts about fighting "all the way with LBJ", as Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt had promised US President Johnson only a few years earlier. No, he told the American generals, who trooped, one after another into his office, colossal Cuban cigars supporting even bigger bravado, he would give them artillery support only for the operation. Infantry? Only sufficient to protect the Australian artillery base.

It was a masterpiece of political military strategy. "All the way" became "only as far as we have to". After all, Big Al reasoned, Bien Hoa Province wasn't his problem and it wasn't Australia's job to go looking for fights outside their patch. That's what the politicians had told him before he left Canberra to take up this command.

"General," the Prime Minister had said, "here's the biggest command of your career, and in a war zone. But for God's sake, don't get any of our Diggers killed."

Of course Big Al couldn't be seen to be girling it by refusing point-blank American requests for help. He had to contribute something. And that's why he hit on the idea of using an artillery battery. He figured he could set up his fire support base about six miles away from the action and still help the Yanks.

It was smart thinking that came unstuck. Unfortunately, the artillery base was set up on a major NVA and VC supply route into Saigon, and the bad guys didn't like that one little bit.

Just thinking about it plummeted Donkey's spirits. He turned his attention back to the story that made heroes one and all, wonderingif there might have been someone, just like him, way back in 1915 sitting in a cosy office somewhere off the Dardanelles, maybe in a ship, composing comforting words to be wired back home in an attempt to ease the pain of the families of the Anzacs butchered at Gallipoli. Maybe on the Kokoda Trail too. He sighed bitterly, frustrated, helpless, resigned, full of revulsion at the madness that nobody could — or would — do anything about.

He turned his attention back to the story, absentmindedly nudging his glasses back up his slippery, sweaty nose. He typed on.

The soldier. Pte Ron Jackson, A Company, 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. Quietly, also drawling, Pte Jackson recalls the action of the first firefight: "We were all sleeping when suddenly the Viet Cong opened up an extremely heavy barrage of mortar and rocket fire. It was twenty to two in the morning. Artillery fire was coming in, close to our front, about one hundred

yards out. Then the Viet Cong started moving in on our wire. We kept up our artillery barrage, bringing it in closer all the while, and we opened up with machine gun fire.

"This went on until about six o'clock in the morning, when the Viet Cong withdrew. I estimate there were about eight hundred men in the force."

Donkey had switched off. The words passed straight from his eyes to his fingers poised over the typewriter keys, by-passing the brain. So much seemed to by-pass the brain these days.

Here is another description, from a soldier who fought in the same action:- Pte Graham Burgess, of Adaminaby, NSW, was in 1 Field Hospital at Vung Tau. He was suffering from shrapnel wounds to the right hand and head. Here is Pte Burgess's unrehearsed story of the action in which he was hit: "I was one of the lucky ones. I didn't get it as bad as most of the other fellows. I'm getting a few headaches at the moment, but that's about all.

"I had just come off my piquet and had got into bed when all of a sudden this loud gibbering started. I raced out of my hoochi and I could see, about twenty yards in front of us, figures in an extended line. They opened up with rockets. There were flashes everywhere. You could hear our men yelling out and you could hear the Viet Cong gibbering.

"Anyway, we went into the weapon pit, opened up on them and seemed to get a few.' (Seemed to get a few. Pte Burgess was right about this. After the battle, 46 dead Viet Cong were counted on the site. There were drag marks showing the enemy had carried away more of his dead and wounded)."

The soldier continues: "Then the section commander came tearing up and he hit the dirt beside us. Then they let go a burst from up the track, where he had come from, and he screamed.

"I look around and he's got a tracer in his right arm, burning. I told him to lie still. Anyway, I managed to get over to him. I rolled him over and told him I was going to try to drag him to the back weapon pit.

"I got him back and just got his legs in. I leaned over to drag him in when a rocket hit him in the top part of his body, and hit me too. When I got back to look at him he was dead. So I went back to my mate in the front pit. Just then my other mate came crawling through the bushes. He was the only one left out of three, the other two were killed.

"We back-pedalled to the next pit and held the Viet Cong off for awhile but they still kept coming through. So the three of us crawled into the bushes and they seemed to be all around us. We managed to crawl about fifty metres into

the artillery's perimeter and there we held out until the early hours of the morning." Pte Burgess added casually that he expected to rejoin his unit "pretty soon".

Donkey leaned back in his chair and stretched, flipping off his glasses which had slid slowly down his muggy, slippery nose yet again. He wiped the moisture from his brow, nose and face and got to his feet, reaching for his coffee cup.

"Coffee!" he announced loudly, "only filling empties."

Two voices echoed from the outer office door. "Well thank you Private Simpson, white with two." Hillingham and Longhurst had timed their entrance perfectly. They had been working in the darkroom. Donkey swore. His own timing had never been worse.

"Fair dinkum, I reckon you blokes can smell coffee before it's even poured," he sniffed.

Hillingham and Longhurst flopped on to the office couch, shouting morning greetings to the Tortoise and Bassett.

"Hillingham, Longhurst, is that you?" inquired the colonel from the inner office and without waiting for an answer in the affirmative (which was probably for the best because he may well have heard Hillingham answer "no, it's fucking Laurel and Hardy") asked, accusingly, "where have you two been? It's rather late to be turning up for work isn't it?"

"In the darkroom sir," replied Longhurst wearily.

"Oh", said the colonel, lowering his heavy eyelids gratefully on to the double chins under his eyes, relieved that he wouldn't have to take the matter further. He didn't really feel up to it this morning. Donkey made the six instant coffees and returned to his Special Report From Vietnam.

When next you read of wounded men on the casualty lists . . .

Donkey suddenly stopped reading, amazed. I didn't know we had unwounded men on the casualty lists too, he thought. “Dear Mum: you will, by now, have seen my name on the latest casualty lists as being UnWounded In Action (UWIA). I'm sure you'll be much relieved to know that the Army got it right this time. And no, just because I made it on to the casualty lists doesn't mean they're sending me home. It just means that any reports of my being killed, wounded or otherwise fucked-up have been greatly exaggerated. Your loving son. PS: Please excuse the 'fucked-up' but it is a fuckt of life.”

"Ha, ha, such wit," said Donkey.

"What?" said Longhurst.

Donkey jumped. He hadn't realised he had spoken out loud. "Nothing," he said to Longhurst, "just a private little piece of cynicism." He raised his voice so Bassett, in the inner office, could hear him. "Sarge Fred," he said with the superior air of a sub-editor, "we have a splendid piece of tautology: wounded men on the casualty lists."

Bassett bridled. "There is a distinction, would you not say dear smartarse private, between KIA and WIA? That sentence makes that distinction. I found it extraordinarily difficult to interview the KIA. They were most uncooperative. And because you're such a fuckwit, Private Simpson, I presume I will have to explain to you why that was the case."

The sarcasm dripped over Donkey until he felt as if a huge honeypot had been upended over him. "All right, all right. Point taken."

"Just type it up, Donk, mind in neutral, that's a good soldier. You're not paid to think, lad."

"Sorry sarge, but I forgot to take my pill, putting mind in neutral, for the use of, this morning."

Donkey heard Bassett's chair scrape back slowly. “Somebody’s going to get a thumping.”

"I'm typing sarge, I'm typing," Donkey sang out, "hear the keys go clickety-clack-clack."

Bassett resumed his seat. Donkey typed, whispering loudly: "Sarge Fled, he numbah tennnnnn!"

Hillingham and Longhurst spluttered into their coffees. Donkey typed.

When next you hear of wounded men on the casualty lists, think of Lance Corporal John Jessap, of Coolangy, Western Australia. He was in hospital when he was asked to tell what had happened to him. He said: - "Well, I got an arm wound, a wound in the left leg and a wound in the right foot. They're all bullet wounds. I got the foot wound first. The bullet went through the top of the boot and out the side. It was practically only a graze and that will be ok. The one in my arm I actually haven't seen myself, but they reckon it's not too bad. But the wound in my left leg has damaged the nerves and I can't use my foot. I got them all in about ten or fifteen minutes. A Viet Cong must have been following us and he opened up. Almost before we knew it we had four wounded and one of our blokes killed."

And this is Corporal Alan McVeigh, of Williamstown, Victoria, speaking. He is in 1 Field Hospital, too. Listen, while he tells why:- "We caught what we think was a leading edge of the force that tried to take over Carol base.

And I caught a rocket fragment behind the knee. We were ambushing three tracks, so that maybe we could get some of them coming through at night. I remember the section next to us opened up and down at the other end 13 Platoon went wild. Someone noticed movement on our left front. We got the order to lay into them. Before I could get a shot strung off there was a big flash. I heard later that it was a rocket that hit a tree. It sprayed fragments everywhere."

Asked if he was satisfied with his progress towards recovery, McVeigh said: "I'm on top of the world. I hope the other blokes here have just as good a recovery as me. I feel like a Mallee bull."

And bully for you, thought Donkey.

For the wider canvas here is Lt Colonel John O'Brien, Commanding Officer of 5 Field Regiment. Colonel O'Brien is from Perth. He's talking about the attack on Fire Support Base Carol:- "The first night that we occupied this area the enemy attack was mainly directed at the gun positions. The attack was in about battalion strength. The enemy came in against the battery position under cover of mortars and intense rocket fire. Two waves came in. They attacked in the early hours of the morning and they pressed home the attacks with great determination. In fact, the enemy was able to over-run part of our mortar section. The enemy also over-ran part of the Regimental Headquarters of 5 Field Regiment and at one stage got into the gun positions. But no guns were captured and enemy who did get into the gun positions were killed on the spot. Most of the enemy were killed on the way to the gun positions by direct fire from the guns, firing beehive charges, and when they ran out of that, firing high explosive. One gun continued to fire even after it had been hit by a rocket. It fired 120 rounds, the gun crew standing by the gun. The enemy that got into the gun positions were shot down by men in their weapon pits covering their own guns. Carol was on what was known as one of the enemy's main trunk routes and obviously this embarrassed him greatly. Hence the ferocity of the attacks."

These Australians, from Lt Colonel to private, could take their places as equals with the Anzacs who landed on a dusty, fire-racked peninsula one April day fifty three years ago.

Glory glory alleluia, Anzac Day lives on, thought Donkey, pulling the last page of the story from his typewriter. He collated it and took it into the colonel. From him Donkey would take it to Big Al for his approval before it was telexed to Canberra for release.

Colonel Pace re-read the story and smiled easily. It was damn good. It was his job to create heroes but in this instance it had been dead-set easy, the soldiers had done it themselves. All he and Bassett had had to do was a simple reporting job. He made one notation at the top of the story, a suggested headline for the editors back home. It read *"No Place For Dingoes . . ."* the icing on the cake, he thought. They'll love that . . .

"While you're on your travels, Donk, would you mind doing me a favor?" Hillingham asked. "Jilly's down in the darkroom and she needs this muck to clean the place up." He swung a two-litre bottle of fluid towards Donkey. "Can you take it down to her for me?"

Donkey grabbed the bottle. "Anything to get out of here for awhile," he grunted.

He left the story with Captain Brown for the general's perusal, slumped down the stairs and walked out into the hot sun, sweating profusely almost immediately. He wandered across the compound to the darkroom and stepped inside. The blast of cold from the air conditioner was beautiful. Jilly was washing down one of the three sinks, cleansing it of chemicals. She turned and smiled as he opened the door and walked in.

"Hello Donkey, what you do here?"

"I've brought you this cleaning stuff. Matt asked me to drop it in to you."

"Thank you." She took the bottle from him, placed it on the bench and reached for a towel. She dried her arms and hands, beckoning excitedly and chatting at the same time. "Look, look. Matt teach me to print pictures." She proudly indicated half a dozen dripping prints hanging from pegs on a drying line. The pictures were all the same, of a Digger on patrol in a rubber tree plantation. But they were all different exposures and all on different grades of paper. They were terrible prints.

"Very good Jilly," commented Donkey, as he moved close behind her to study her work. He slid his hands around her waist, gently easing her back into his chest. She turned her head, looking back up to him, smiling, pleased with herself. He bent down, trying to find her mouth with his. It was awkward. She turned, reaching for him. They kissed and as her tongue sought and found his, a grenade exploded in his belly.

Jilly felt his excitement. She knew she had him. She pulled away gently and moved to the door. She placed a sign on its outside: PRINTING IN PROGRESS. DO NOT ENTER. She closed the door and locked it, flicking off the bright light, momentarily plunging the small room into blackness. She

then turned on the printing light, surrounding them in an eerie red glow, and moved back into his arms, the dull red blaze dancing on her shining, onyx hair. Donkey was on fire. He kissed her passionately, his hands cupping her bottom, pulling her into him. She responded, her fingers dancing lightly up and down his back, sparking thrilling shivers down his spine.

She broke the kiss, slowly. "Sit down," she ordered Donkey huskily. There was only one chair in the darkroom and Donkey did as he was told. She stood in front of him, fixing him with her eyes, and began to unhook her ao dai. He tried to reach out to her but she took half a step back, just outside his grasp. The silk of the ao dai slipped away and she stood in her silk slacks and bra. She came forward and sat on his knees facing him. His hands went to her breasts. She moaned and kissed him hungrily, her hips thrusting into him. He undid her bra, fumbling badly, and it slipped from her shoulders. Her breasts were perfect, beautiful. He bent his mouth to them, the night light caressing her ivory skin with scarlet. She caught her breath and then exhaled with pleasure.

"Oh Donkey, Donkey," she cried, "love me, love me!" She reached for his trousers, undid his belt and unzipped his fly. She stood up, pulling his trousers down, as he tugged frantically at hers. She caught her breath when she saw him. "Big, big boy!" she panted and lowered herself on to him, gasping, eyes wide and rounding.

***

To Natasha, Cassidy was only one thing: her ticket to America. Whatever he wanted from her, she gave. Now, as she lay back in his pillows watching him muttering to himself, she wondered how she might help him in his dilemma. For the tenth time he muttered: “I just can’t work it out. Who the hell’s behind this?”

When Natasha had told him what Simpson had said to Little Flower he thought it was just too fantastic for words. In fact he had laughed it off, saying Simpson had said the first thing that came into his head just to get his gun into action. But after Natasha had ministered to his need to fire off his own shot, a little paranoia crept into his thinking. What if Simpson had been serious? Natasha had said he had been drunk and randy enough to be indiscreet. No! If there was any plan being hatched by anyone he would know about it. Wouldn’t he? Of course! Langley hadn’t even hinted of any special operation up north, especially one with such a high priority target. He would *have* to know if something like that was being planned. Or would he?

There were people at Langley, he knew, who didn't like Cassidy's swashbuckling style; who had tried to destroy him in the past. Was this another plot against him? Using the Aussies to get around the Cowboy? And this guy Simpson: first the nukes, then this! Who the hell is this guy? And if it was a plot, Big Al had to be in on it too. And he'd thought he was a friend. But no, he thought, the whole damn thing's just too crazy for words! *Riding up the Ho Chi Minh trail on a white charger dressed in a Santa Claus suit?* Ha! Gard-dam crazy Arzzie sense of humor.

And yet, and yet . . . he was where he was today by being absolutely faithful to his 11th Commandment: Protect thine own arse!

"Gard-dam it girl," he drawled to Natasha, "ah doan believe I'm doin' this but ah want you to find out what the hell's going on here, mebbe through Errington . . ."

"And remember, general, I can also use Jilly. She works in Simpson's office now."

"Hell, any which way." He sighed, drained. "Everything in this world just gets crazier and crazier."

***

Donkey jumped off the bus and headed into the Canberra's foyer where earlier arrivals were crowded around the bar sucking cans. He waved absently towards a couple of mates and headed for the stairs and his room. He propped his rifle in a corner and reached into the fridge for a can of beer, flopping on to his bed and taking a long swig. He stripped off his saturated shirt, slipped off his shoes and socks and wiggled his damp toes luxuriously. His tinea immediately began to itch. Damn heat, he thought to himself, scratching. He lay back on his bed and finished his can before stripping off completely and heading for the shower. He buried his head under the weak spray, feeling the day's sweat and grime losing its battle to stick.

After dusting his feet with tinea powder and rubbing it between his toes, Donkey grabbed another can and flopped back on his bed, naked, the only way to be in the oppressive heat. There was no hurry to get down to the mess for dinner. He hated queues anyway and there would be one downstairs now. And there was Jilly to think about. He had thought the first time, Little Flower, was good. But Jilly, wow! She had been just sensational! If that was what fucking was all about, why had he waited so long!

And he was in love. That brought on feelings of guilt. Allison was still at home, waiting for him. Did he still love her, he wondered. Yes, he finally

decided cunningly, Brian Simpson did. And Donkey Simpson loved Jilly. When in Rome . . .

He drained his can slowly and then decided to dress and go down to the bar. He slipped on a pair of shorts, loose shirt and thongs, pocketed his wallet and smokes and headed downstairs.

Halfway down he came face to face with a stranger lugging a packed seabag and rifle. His shirt and trousers looked new. They still had horizontal fold marks in them. His slouch hat looked crisp and yet there was something in his dark eyes that told Donkey this bloke was no "newie". And he wore the hat badge of an infantryman. He stopped two steps below Donkey and looked up.

"G'day mate, can you tell me where room 301 is?"

"Yeah, I can as a matter of fact," answered Donkey, taken aback. Room 301 was his and Ned's. "Why?"

"The duty sergeant has put me in there for the night. I'm flying home tomorrow."

Donkey wasn't all that delighted with that news. True, Ned's bed would be empty that night because he was on guard duty at the Free World but Donkey had been looking forward to having a peaceful night by himself making a tape to send to Allison. Now that his anticipated privacy had been ruined, that would be impossible. Still, after what had happened today with Jilly, that might have proven difficult anyway. "Going home, eh," said Donkey turning around, "come on then you lucky bastard, I'll take you up. It's my room he's put you in."

"Great!" said the Digger. "Thanks a lot."

Donkey swept open the door of his room and stood aside, bowing at the waist and sweeping his right arm aside in invitation.

"Welcome to the Hotel Canberra, sir," he said, ushering the Digger inside.

"Hey, this is all right, isn't it," the Digger said, wide-eyed as he looked around at the real beds, tape players, speakers, wardrobes, the ensuite shower-toilet.

"Yep," replied Donkey, "it's not exactly the Hong Kong Hilton but it's a hell of a sight better than what you blokes call home down at the Dat."

"You're not wrong there." He dropped his bag and put out his hand. "Sorry, I should have said earlier — I'm Greg Burns." He was just over six feet, well built with a shock of black, loosely curled hair. Sweat clung to his acned face. Without the pimples, Donkey thought, he'd be a bloody handsome bastard.

Something made Donkey feel uneasy about the lad. And then he suddenly realised what it was. The eyes again. Dark and brooding, they flicked incessantly, left, right, left again. Never still for more than a second.

"Donkey," he said, taking Burns' hand. "Donkey Simpson. The name's Brian but everybody calls me Donkey."

"Simpson and his donkey?"

"Yeah," said Donkey surprised. "Not many people get that right. Most think the name comes from the fact that I'm an idiot. That doesn't bother me either though. A man's got to be some sort of an idiot to survive in this Godforsaken Army."

Burns grinned in acknowledgment and dropped gratefully on to Ned's bed.

"I was just going down for a beer and a hamburger or something when I met you on the stairs. Wanna join me?"

"Yep, sure, but I think I'll have a real shower in that bathroom of yours first. This place sure beats hell out of the Dat."

Donkey left him to it. He was on his second can when Burns joined him at the bar.

"Fair dinkum," enthused Burns, "this is bloody palatial. What a set-up! If the boys at the Dat knew you blokes lived like this there'd be a bloody revolt!"

"Yeah, it's not bad I suppose," sniffed Donkey into his can, "but a lot of them do know we live like this. And when I was down there a while back not one bloke I talked to wanted to swap with me. The Dat's got its good points too, you know, like no Nogs for instance."

"True."

"And it's a bit of a bastard here at the moment. Because of the warries going on around the city and the new six o'clock curfew we can't go out. Mate, the delights of Saigon are absolutely out of this world. Mind you, this whole fucked-up place is out of this world, if you ask me."

Donkey dominated the conversation, telling Burns all about Saigon, its girls, bars, the I House, the Free World building. They grabbed the last two hamburgers from the mess just before it closed and returned to the bar. When it closed at nine o'clock they staggered up to Donkey's room three parts to the wind.

"Da dah!" sang Donkey, flinging open the door of the fridge, "more piss!"

"I'll drink to that!" enthused Burns, staring open-mouthed at the well-stocked fridge. "Christ, you blokes have got it made here! On top of

everything else, unlimited piss! We're on a two-can per day ration at the Dat, although I must admit its usually not too difficult to find an extra one or two."

"Ha! Two-can limit. What a joke! We're supposed to be on that too but the Army, old son, is not as stupid as you or I think. It knows the value of obliteration of the mind through piss. *Stops the bastards thinking. Dangerous that. Fill 'em up with piss and keep 'em happy.* Works too."

Donkey flopped on to his bed, morose. "Stops you thinking. Yeah. Helps you sleep. It does too. Makes you forget."

"Until you wake up in the morning."

"Yeah, funny about that, eh," grinned Donkey, willing himself into a more gregarious frame of mind. "Anyhow, I've told you all about the Pearl of the Orient, what's been happening at the Dat? And how come you're flying home alone? Don't you blokes usually go home together, as a battalion?"

"Yeah, we usually do."

"Special leave? Had your arse shot off or something?"

"No," said Burns, holding up his right hand, "the top of my trigger finger."

Donkey looked in astonishment at Burns' right hand. The top of the badly scarred index finger from the top knuckle was missing. Instead of a nail, Burns sported an angry red, deeply scarred stump.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry," muttered Donkey, deeply embarrassed and ashamed of his smartarse crack.

"Ah, forget it," Burns laughed, his voice a little off-key. "Most of it is still there although it's almost bloody useless. The Army thinks so, anyway. That's why they're sending me home. I can't fire a rifle now they reckon."

Burns held up his hand and stared at his two-thirds finger. "They should have taken the whole fucking thing off. You know why they didn't?" Burns' speech, though slurred by the effects of the beer, was quickening, words beginning to jump over one another. Donkey shook his head, trying not to look at the finger.

"Because of the fucking pension system. If I had lost my entire finger they would have had to pay me a pension for two knuckles. This way they only have to pay me for one."

Donkey, mouth open, was stunned. "Well, I'll be fucked," he managed quietly. Burns didn't hear him. The wall he had built across the face of his emotions was cracking. He hadn't intended to tell anyone but the beer had sharpened the memory, the pain, the fear, the need to talk to someone, anyone. His red-stumped finger suddenly throbbed. He grabbed at it and

began massaging it slowly, tenderly, his head down.

"It happened at Carol," he volunteered. "The first night. We'd only had time to dig shallow foxholes and string out a bit of wire, put a few sandbags around the guns . . ." His voice trailed off in memory.

He suddenly lifted his head, massaging his finger with vigorous jerks, then clasping his hands, wringing his fingers. His dark eyes sparkled, large, memory burning. The chronology of his story was lost in relived anguish, fear. The mask was cracking, falling away. The replay was on. His voice stumbled, jerked, rushed.

"Mortars . . . rockets . . . flares . . . Godfuck . . ." He dropped his head into his hands. "There were hundreds, thousands of them. In uniform. They were NVA, the best of the best, not local VC. Screaming, screaming . . . wave after wave . . . the more we shot the more there were."

Burns lifted his head again, slowly, stifling a sob. His eyes brimmed with tears. Suddenly the words spewed out in a rush.

"My rifle was knocked from my hands. Something hit the trigger guard, smashing my finger. I didn't realise. I didn't know. I didn't feel a thing. I grabbed for my rifle but it was too late. Christ! They were on me, over me, all around me! I was so shit-scared I just froze! FROZE! Waiting for a . . . a . . . bayonet. Oh no! Not a bayonet! Not that way! Not a bayonet . . ."

Burns was almost hysterical, his body jerking with wracking sobs, his eyes darting, flashing, streaming tears. Donkey was transfixed, paralysed.

"I was so fucking scared I *shit* myself!" Burns hissed through clenched teeth. " Yeah, I poohed my pants, like a fucking baby . . . *shit myself . . . shit myself . . ."*

His voice trailed off into broken sobs. He dropped his head into his hands again, shoulders hunched, his torso convulsing with each sob. "Shit myself . . . shit myself . . ." Suddenly he jumped up, staggered into the bathroom and threw up, retching convulsively.

Donkey was stunned. Words were beyond him but he felt he should do something. But what? He could only sit and stare as Burns reeled back from the bathroom and sat down again on Ned's bed, still sobbing. Instinctively Donkey stood up and walked over to Burns. He sat down beside him and put a comforting arm around his shoulders, gripping him tightly. That was all he could think to do, there were no words.

Slowly Burns' sobbing decreased, his body jerking less often, less violently. He finally breathed in deeply and sighed, open-mouthed. He pulled

a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his eyes and face before wringing and twisting his wet hands in it. He turned to Donkey, eyes still glistening and yet dulled now.

"Thanks mate." He turned away again. "Sorry about that. I'll be all right now. I think I'll go to bed."

Donkey dropped his arm from Burns' shoulders. Still there were no words. He merely nodded his head. Burns stripped quickly, quietly, got into bed and pulled the single sheet over him. Exhausted, he was soon asleep, small infrequent sobs breaking his ragged breathing, just like a distressed baby.

Donkey sat on his bed in the dark, still stunned. Neon lights from shops across the road threw shadows into the room. No, shafts. Shafts of light. Christ almighty, he thought bitterly, has that bloke been shafted! He went to the fridge and grabbed another can. There was no sleep for him now. He took a chair outside and sat on the balcony in the cooler night air so as not to disturb Burns, seeking solace, wisdom in the bottom of a can of VB. How old had he said he was? Nineteen? Only bloody nineteen! And suddenly a thought occurred to him.

"Sarge Fled," he mimicked quietly, "how come you didn't get Private Burns's story when you interviewed those blokes in Vung Tau hospital? How come, sarge?"

And he kept repeating the question, over and over, mumbling, "how come, sarge?"

Another question without answer.

CHAPTER 18

Ned and Donkey picked up the Jeep during their lunch-hour the following day. It had been a sight unseen purchase but they were pleased with the result. It looked less than 12 months old and sported only a couple of minor dents, quite remarkable for a Saigon chariot. When they drove it into the Transport yard, Sam Smiley too was pleased. After looking the vehicle over he stood back, mopped his brow with his hat and shook his head in wonder.

"Four dozen bloody cans."

"And a pair of boots," corrected Ned again, "and we're using it tonight. Donkey's hooks came through today, it's my birthday and we've planned a celebration."

"Well I suppose that's fair enough. I'm the guard sergeant tonight anyway." He thrust out his hand. "Gentlemen, here's to a successful partnership." They shook on the deal in a triple handshake.

***

Lieutenant Colonel Jack West was a short rotund man. Donkey didn't much like the look of him. His face had the frozen expression of a stern school master. The sergeant photographer who had accompanied him from Canberra, Dick "Wacker" Crawley, was just the opposite. A Regular Army photographer attached to the Canberra PR headquarters, he was tall and thin, around six foot three. He had fair reddish-blonde hair and a freckled face. The sun was to play havoc with his complexion in the coming weeks. He was never without his wide-brimmed slouch hat, both sides of which lay flat. It looked more like Slim Dusty's trademark than ceremonial Army headgear. A large red cravat, sprinkled with white dots, was always knotted around his throat to protect the back of his neck and the V formed by the neckline of his green Army shirt. Dark glasses completed his practical outfit.

"If you're gunna play the Cecil B DeMille part you might as well look it," was his approach to his filming. Colonel West and Sergeant Crawley had flown in to Vietnam that morning on a normal commercial flight to film Australian soldiers at work and, more importantly, to give them the opportunity, through film, to say "g'day" and "Happy Christmas" to their families and loved ones back home. They would be joined by Bernie

Longhurst as sound man and Donkey as gofer and the recorder of who was on what piece of film.

The order was to get 300 Diggers on celluloid. This would then be edited in Canberra and sent out for viewing on Christmas Day to every television station in the country. The assignment would take the four-man crew from one end of South Vietnam to the other and take more than a month to complete.

The prospect of tripping around the country excited Donkey. He was well and truly fed up with Saigon. He wasn't all that sure about the colonel but Crawley seemed okay. His wide grin and sparkling blue eyes broadcast a great sense of humor and fun.

What had surprised him about both the colonel and Crawley was that they were both wearing Vietnam service ribbons. They had served in Vietnam already for one twelve-month period and had, in fact, been back twelve months earlier to do the Christmas messages so they were on their third trip and they knew their way around.

Donkey had never worked with film before but he soon learned that his job was quite simple. He would organise the soldiers to be filmed, record their names, ranks and home addresses and their order of appearance on each roll of film shot. Each Digger was allowed a maximum of thirty seconds to say whatever he liked; rarely did anyone get anywhere near that. As soon as the camera began whirring they became camera-shy and tongue-tied.

***

The thing that surprised Jilly about Operation Santa Claus was that everyone was so open about it. At least, they were open about the filming phase of the operation. Nobody was saying anything about the plan to assassinate Ho Chi Minh, particularly Donkey. She had tried to quiz him, subtlely, but had come up with nothing at all. He seemed quite open about everything else but covered himself so well about his real mission that she was beginning to wonder whether it existed at all. There was absolutely no hint of it; he gave no indication at all of tension or nerves; she had no further information than what she had originally read in that file. And that seemed to have disappeared too. She had kept an eye on the Top Secret files coming into the office and that one had never re-appeared. She was beginning to become worried. She had to do something, risk something, to get more information, but she didn't know what. And she had to do it before Donkey went to Nui Dat in two days' time with the film crew. She would have to

entice him back to her villa for a night, force-feed him on love and bourbon and see what he puked up.

She managed to lure him out of the office for a few moments late in the day and invited him to come to dinner at her place that evening. She was surprised when he appeared reluctant.

"Thanks Jilly, but I dunno. You see Ned and I had planned a bit of a celebration tonight. My corporal's stripes have finally been approved and it’s Ned's 20th birthday. We were going to go out on the town."

"Then bring Ned too! I'll make a birthday cake for him."

Donkey was still unsure. "Might be a bit awkward, Jilly. Three's a crowd."

"Then I will arrange a girlfriend for Ned. Very beautiful." She smiled wickedly. "Very sexy!"

"Naughty!" scolded Donkey, but he liked the idea. "I'll see what Ned thinks."

That didn't suit Jilly at all. If Ned said no . . . "I have another idea. Why tell him? Why not make it a surprise party for him? He'll love that! A very romantic evening, no?"

"Well . . ."

"Good. Then that's settled. Seven o'clock." She handed him a piece of paper. "Here is my address."

Before Donkey could change his mind she was gone. He really didn't want to anyway. He just hoped Ned liked the idea — and his blind date.

Ned and Donkey caught the bus back to the Canberra that afternoon, showered quickly and discussed their plan of attack for the night.

"Champagne and caviar!" declared Ned.

"I'm not that flush," moaned Donkey, thumbing through the notes in his wallet. "And I want to get these hooks sewn on my shirts tonight. I'll tell you what we'll do. There’s a seamstress shop opposite the Capitol. I'll get them to fix one shirt straight away, put that on and I can pick up the rest tomorrow. Then we can get a cab to the Free World, pick up the Jeep and drive over to Tu Do Street."

"Sounds all right to me."

"We'll have to take the bottle of Scotch, though. I don't reckon I've got enough dough to last the night otherwise."

Ned agreed and they were quickly on their way, the full bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label swinging in Donkey's left hand. They had switched to Scotch or bourbon on their forays into the bars because it was cheaper and

more convenient. Vietnamese beer usually gave them a big serve of diarrhoea and the bar owners charged a fortune for black market American beer. And although this was always served icy cold, Saigon's heat made it luke warm before half a can had been drunk. The one thing that was not unreasonably priced was a glass of Coke or ginger ale filled with crushed ice. Add a byo whisky and you had a cold drink that would last the distance.

At last I'm somebody in this man's Army, even if it's only a little somebody, Donkey thought as he walked from the seamstress's shop admiring the two corporal's stripes on each sleeve.

"Feel better than being a baggy-arse?" grinned Ned.

"Much."

They hurried back outside to get a cab but surprisingly none were in sight. They opted for two kamikazes instead.

They had gone less than a mile before Donkey was sitting back in the chair as far as he could, arms gripping it tightly. It had been a long time since he had ridden in one of these things while sober and he had forgotten just how terrifying they could be. Responding to the challenge thrown at them, the two drivers raced neck and neck through the choked, blue exhaust choking streets towards the finishing line, the Free World Building, ducking and weaving their machines in and out and around other traffic with a dexterity that would have done Lionel Rose proud. Donkey and Ned could see "punches" coming for them from all directions. A car would loom up ahead at terrifying speed as the kamikazes charged at rear bumpers only to swing away at the last possible moment — into oncoming traffic. Time and again Donkey swore he was going to be splashed all over the grille of a bus or truck. He was beginning to wonder what sort of addendum the Army would affix to his KIA. Perhaps "attempting to smother an enemy bus with his body".

Donkey's driver won by a yard. "Dodgem cars will never be the same," he sighed after dismounting.

They walked past the security guards on the gate and into the Free World compound, finding the Jeep around the back near the helicopter pad where SS had said he would leave it. Ned started it first go and they drove quietly from the compound and out into the milling traffic.

"Tu Do, you beautiful, gorgeous Noggie Fleshpot, here we come!" hooted Ned.

The Tu Do Street bars, dozens of them, seemed to have a mortgage on the most beautiful girls in the world and Ned was keen to fix himself on to one of

them. Donkey was firmly against the idea.

"You've already had one dose you bloody idiot. Surely you don't want another one!" Donkey scolded Ned.

"There's blokes here who have had it half a dozen times. They're still walking around."

"Yeah, and when they get home, what if it recurs? What then?"

"Ah, bullshit!"

"It can, you know."

"Only a real bad dose."

"And who's to say your next dose won't be a real bad one? What if you cop a load of Saigon Rose mate? They can't cure that. You've got the Big Siff. And you know what happens if you cop that — you're not allowed to go home. You'll be stuck in this arse'oling place for the rest of your life. Shipped home in a green bodybag eventually. Come to think of it, they mightn't even do that for you. Can't have poxy leprous bodies buried in the Land of Oz, mate."

Ned wasn't fazed at all. He just grinned broadly and drove on.

"We have to make a slight detour first," Donkey announced, handing Ned the note Jilly had given him. "This is the address."

"What's this all about?"

"Some friends of the Padre's. He asked me to drop this in to them." Donkey flourished a crumpled white envelope.

"Fucking waste of good nookie time," Ned grumbled.

Jilly's villa was on a wide, tree-lined street in the best part of Saigon, not far from the presidential palace.

"Very nice," enthused Ned as he pulled up outside.

"You should see the inside, mate, it's absolute luxury. Come with me and have a squiz."

"Yeah, I might just do that."

They got out of the Jeep and walked up to the front door. Donkey knocked.

Ned was surprised when Jilly opened the door and then amazed when he saw Fanny smiling behind her.

"Surprise!" they harmonised. And then they began to sing Happy Birthday to Ned. He stood on the porch with his mouth wide open.

Donkey was surprised too when he saw Fanny. "Ned has big mouth, I have big ears," Jilly explained slyly to him later when he asked. He just shook his head. This girl of his was turning out to be a real surprise.

Fanny flew at Ned and wrapped her arms around him tightly, hugging him, before taking him by the hand and leading him inside. She sat him on the sofa, slipped out of her silver high-heeled shoes and plonked down on her knees beside him.

Ned was still stunned. He looked at Fanny in astonishment. Gone was the whore, here was a real beauty. She was wearing a long, tight, western style, massively expensive Thai silk evening dress, split down the left side to mid-thigh. It's colours shimmered between aquamarine and bright blue. The vee neckline highlighted her small but perfectly shaped breasts. She was wearing very little make-up, a complete contrast to her pink plaster working face, and her long, shining, jet-black hair was piled on top of her head in a series of interlocking swirls. In the bar she always wore it long, down her back.

Ned soaked up her beauty. He had never seen her in such bright light. The bars were so dim. Her eyes sparkled, deep brown pools, classically almond shaped and highlighted with just a shade of shadow. Her nose was a little flat, but not ugly, her smile wide in such a small mouth.

She soaked up his obvious admiration, smiling, then leaned forward and kissed him. "You like?"

Ned spluttered. "Fanny, you're absolutely gorgeous!"He turned to Donkey. "But what the hell's going on?"

"It's your birthday, isn't it, and this is a party."

Jilly suddenly appeared from the kitchen carrying a birthday cake with 20 candles blazing fiercely. They all sang Happy Birthday for him again.

"Well, I must say, I didn't expect anything like this. Shit, Donk, give us a drink fer Christ's sake!"

Donkey poured Scotches all round and they toasted Ned.

The meal served by Jilly was traditional Vietnamese. The soldiers had no idea what they were eating but it was delicious. They drank three bottles of classic French Riesling which Jilly produced, and finished the meal with coffee and French cognac. Jilly even produced two cigars for the men.

Back on the couch Fanny was sitting on Ned's knee. He was in seventh heaven. It was the best birthday he'd ever had, he said, as Fanny muzzled into his neck. "You no come see me long, long time," she murmured, slurring slightly, into his ear. "Why you no come?"

Ned had been surprised that she hadn't mentioned their last meeting earlier. That had been when she had saved he, SS and Jansen from the gang of cowboys. At the time she had promised to seek an explanation from him and

now she was as good as her word. He hadn't been back to see her because he knew she'd stack on a turn. "Ah well," he lied, "book-oo work, too much work."

She didn't buy it. "You find new girl?" she whispered.

He knew he was in trouble now and really wondered why. How could a damned whore demand loyalty from him, he wondered. Bloody outrageous! Yet here he was trying to think up a bunch of lies to assure her he'd been faithful! And he did remember that at the time Fanny had threatened to bite his balls off the next time she saw him. When he tried to speak all he could do was prattle. "That night, you know, when you saved us, well, the next morning wasn't it . . . actually, we owe you for that Fanny believe me. . . you've got no idea, we were in deep shit, we thought we were history and I've been meaning to come back and say thank you but well . . ."

His well ran dry. She licked his ear. He expected at any moment that it would be bitten off.

"She good jigajig? Better than Fanny?" she whispered.

"No, no!" He decided to try to brazen it out, reached for a cigarette, an American Marlboro, and lit it. "Look Fanny, I tried to find you that night. I was depressed, lonely, I needed you and you weren't there. So I found someone else. So what?" Even as he spoke he noticed Donkey and Jilly cuddled up cosily on a facing sofa, Donkey grinning broadly and Jilly obviously trying to suppress a giggle with her hand up to her mouth. Now that's something the bastard's been hiding from me, Ned thought. I wonder how long he's been on with Jilly? Fanny brought him back to their discussion.

"She good jigajig?" she repeated.

"No," Ned spat sulkily, "bloody awful. Waste of twenty five bucks."

Suddenly she flew at him like an enraged fighting cock, her nails scratching at his face and eyes. *"You numbah ten Uc Dai Loi cheat fuckee bastard!"* she screeched, falling on top of him as he toppled off the sofa on to the floor, his arms flailing above him to try to ward her off. "So you no love Fanny! You lie! You think me worth only twenyfive dollar. You numbah one arsehole!"

"No no!" panted Ned trying to defend himself. Already he could feel blood welling from slashes on his face. "That's not what I said! Shit, cut it out!"

"I kill you! I bite off your balls!" She threw her head down towards his crutch. He wriggled frantically away from her snarling teeth. Donkey and Jilly were laughing loudly. That upset him even more.

"Don't just sit there you bastards, help me! Get her off! She's going to kill me!"

As Ned wrestled with Fanny, trying desperately to pin her flailing arms as well as protect his groin, a familiar song crept into a corner of his brain. Then he heard the sound of a Jeep being started and revved hard, followed by the crash of an abused gearbox.

Jansen knew he was in trouble. He was a long way from home and had no hope of getting back to the Canberra before curfew. And then he saw the Jeep parked in front of the mansion. That'll do, he thought. Breaking out into his favorite ditty, *Good Old Collingwood Forever*, he jumped in, hot wired the car and slammed it into gear.

Suddenly Ned's head, hearing the familiar refrain, slammed into gear too. "Jansen!" he yelled. "Fucking Jansen's pinching the Jeep!" He threw Fanny off him with an almighty heave, sending her flying across the room. He raced for the front door and charged outside on to the road but he was too late. The dying strains of *Good Old Collingwood Forever* and a flying black and white scarf disappeared around a corner fifty yards away in a squeal of tyres. The Jeep was gone. He gave chase but by the time he reached the corner there was no sign of Jansen or the Jeep. Ned cursed loudly all the way back to Jilly's apartment.

"Never mind," said Donkey pragmatically. "At least you know who took it. And you can get it back in the morning."

"I'll kill the bastard!" Ned swore.

"That's right. He'll have to leave it near the Canberra somewhere. Don't worry about it mate. We'll fix him up tomorrow. He wouldn't have known it was yours anyway."

"I'll still kill the prick." He turned on Fanny. "Are you happy now, you stupid fucking bitch? I've lost me fuckin' Jeep because of you!"

Fanny was contrite. She had wanted to punish Ned but not estrange or anger him. "Sorry Ned," she whimpered, bursting into tears. "I go home now, I spoil your party."

Ned's anger melted at the sight of her tears. "Ah shit, Fanny, don't cry. I didn't mean to . . . look, come here." He put out his arms and she crawled into them, sobbing softly on his shoulder. "Stop that," he whispered, pulling her chin up and kissing her on the mouth, tasting her salty tears. Her tongue sought his and she pressed herself into him, exciting him immediately. He had quickly forgotten the Jeep.

"Come," she whispered, taking his hand and leading him meekly into a bedroom.

"Looks like he's getting this one for free," Donkey said to Jilly as they watched them disappear.

Jilly threw her arms around his neck and kissed him strongly. "And you can have it for free too, lover boy," she murmured, taking his hand and leading him into her bedroom.

That night was the beginning of Donkey's sex education. She was wonderful, leading, showing, coaxing, and finally climaxing with him. She taught him and talked to him until dawn, when, exhausted, they both fell asleep. It was after their first climax that Jilly began her gentle interrogation.

"I'll miss you."

"What do you mean you'll miss me?"

"When you go to take pictures."

"Oh, on the film shoot. I wondered what you meant for a second."

"Where you go?"

"All over the country. Wherever there's Australians, I suppose. Certainly Nui Dat and Vung Tau. Then we'll come back here for a few days before we head north.

Jilly caught her breath. "Where to north?"

"Danang only, to the Australian Training Team, as far as I know."

"Where are they?"

"Don't know, somewhere in the city I suppose."

"What they do?"

"Train ARVN."

"They fight?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"Out in the bush with the ARVN."

"You go in bush?"

"Dunno. If we have to I suppose we will."

"I no like you go bush, no like you go north. I tell colonel send someone else."

Donkey laughed. "Bullshit! I want to go. We won't be in any more danger than what we are here. We only plan to go to Danang. I doubt if there's anyone in Hanoi who'd want to send a cheerio to Uncle Arthur and Aunty Bet in Corangamite." He grinned, a private little joke in the dark.

She didn't understand. "What you say? Why you say Hanoi?"

"Well, that's where Uncle Ho and his cronies are, isn't it. And I doubt he'd want to send a Christmas message to anyone back in Australia, that's what I said."

"Oh."

"Though come to think of it, he probably would like to send a special thank you to Jim Cairns and his commo mates for helping their war effort. Yeah, maybe we will go to Hanoi."

Jilly became alarmed. "No-oo. You no can do!"

"Why not? I think I'll suggest it to the colonel. Let's go shoot Uncle Ho, I'll say, after all, who better to ho-ho-ho on Christmas Day than Ho himself!" He guffawed, pleased with his teasing.

Suddenly Jilly was panic-stricken. He had said it! Shoot Uncle Ho! Did he mean on Christmas Day? What was he talking about? How would he get to Hanoi from Danang? How could be possibly kill Uncle Ho? Then Donkey was turning towards her.

"Anyway, what's with all these questions?" He raised himself on one elbow and looked at her. “You know, you don’t look very nice in a coolie hat,” he murmured slyly.

“What?”

“With betel nut teeth, car tyre sandals . . .”

“What you talk about?”

“I had a dream about you not long ago, you were a VC, ug-leee, black pyjamas, AK47 . . .”

She bridled angrily. “I no VC! What you talk ’bout! Jilly no VC!”

He laughed. “Don’t get your knickers in a knot, it was only a dream.”

She didn’t understand the Australian colloquialism. Still peeved, she snapped at him. “What knickers? . . . knot? No unnerstan.”

He smiled at her. “Just kidding Jilly, just kidding.” His tongue brushed across her right nipple, making her shiver. "We don't have time for questions."

Donkey had been asleep for only ten minutes when Ned was shaking him awake.

"C'mon, we've got to get back. I want to find my Jeep and that bastard Jansen before we go to work," he insisted as Donkey tried to roll over and ignore him.

They stumbled back towards the Judas gate at the hotel's entrance — and

walked straight into SS.

"What the bloody hell do you two think you're doing!" he hissed.

"Wha . . ." spluttered Ned.

"Thought you were guard sergeant at the Free Wor . . ." Donkey stopped, his sleep starved brain struggling with what SS had told them earlier. No, he hadn't said that at all, had he. He had simply said that he was on guard duty that night. And his post just happened to be right here, at the Canberra.

"What do you think you're doin' losing my fuckin' Jeep?"

"Your Jeep?" Ned was recovering slowly from the shock of bumping into SS.

"My Jeep!" He pointed. "Out there! In the middle of the bloody road!"

"For a start," Ned snarled," let's get it right. It's *our* Jeep. And we didn't lose it, fucking Jansen pinched it."

"I know that. He came bowling in here last night as pissed as ten men, ten minutes after curfew. I had no choice but to leave the damn thing right there, where he parked it."

"Leave the prick to me."

"I've already kicked his arse and put him on a charge."

"You can't do that! Shit, the whole world will know about the Jeep then and you can kiss it goodbye. No lovely little trips to Vungers then, old mate."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. I didn't think of that."

"Look sarge, just leave him to me, right?"

"Okay, that might be better."

"In the meantime, Donkey and I will have a quick shower and get it back to the Free World."

"Right."

Ned and Donkey went up the stairs two at a time. "What are you going to do about Jansen," Donkey asked.

"Nothing yet. But I'll plan something. He won't remember a thing when he wakes up this morning so let's leave it lay for a bit."

They showered and dressed hurriedly, jumped into the Jeep and had it in SS's yard by 6.30.

"No other bastard will even be up yet," moaned Donkey as they walked from the Transport compound towards their offices. He turned on Ned.

"It's your bloody fault! You and your hare-brained schemes! Always trouble!"

Ned objected. "What do you mean, always my fault? You can't blame

every bloody thing on me! What about the time you blew your brains on martinis at the I House. Was that my fault, eh?"

"Yeah. You knew I was going troppo — you told me — and you shouldn't have let me go out."

"For cryin' out loud!"

"We're a weird mob all right mate," Donkey grinned. "I suppose a bloke's got to have some fun now and again . . ."

"Unless he wants to go troppo!"

Donkey used the time before the rest of the Headquarters Company arrived to write letters. Hunched over his typewriter, he was startled when the office door burst open. It was Bassett, Hillingham and Longhurst.

"Coffee Private Simpson!" they chorused. "Morning Private Simpson."

"Wrong!" Donkey shouted. "From now on gentlemen, the Standard Operating Procedure for greeting your gofer of a morning shall be, and I quote, 'good morning *Corporal* Simpson, coffee *Corporal* Simpson'."

"Well have a look at that, our normally cheerless baggyarse gofer has become a happy hooker," noted Bassett. "Gentlemen, congratulations are in order for our new corporal here. Now, are we ready?"

"Congratulations corporal," they chorused, "good morning corporal. Now get the fucking coffee corporal!"

"Thank you gentlemen. Now that you have put it so nicely I shall be delighted to get the coffee. I need a piss anyway."

"Happy little Vegemites again, as usual, this morning I see." It was the Tortoise. Nobody had seen him waddle in. "Oh, you've finally got your hooks, Donkey. Congratulations!"

"Thank you sir!" said Donkey effusively. "I'm glad your eyes are clear and sparkling this morning boss because there are three pairs in this office that aren't even open yet."

"I'll have a cup of coffee too please corporal."

Donkey sighed, defeated. "Well, that makes four out of five of us. Four red-veined eyeball fixers coming up."

"War's hell, corporal," grinned Bassett.

"Especially from where you all appear to be viewing it this morning."

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“I have no doubt at all she read the Operation Santa Claus file when I dropped it on Colonel Pace’s desk,” Errington told Big Al.

“Good. At least that’s working in our favor,” the brigadier said, “but to this point there’s been no obvious reaction.”

“No sir, and we must assume General Dong has been briefed.”

The general snorted. “Paul, if you were in Dong’s shoes, what would your reaction be?”

The brigadier thought for a moment. “It depends on what my own aims and ambitions might be, general. It might suit my purpose to lay low for a bit, see what develops. He must realise it’s early days yet as far as Operation Santa Claus is concerned.”

“Something smells bad, real bad, particularly since Swanker got hit. And now I’m worried about Simpson,” the general spat as he paced his office. “Will they have a go at him too? While he’s out of here, maybe, doing this filming thing? It’s not so simple any more Paul. Is Dong behind any of this? Is this part of a larger plot? Can’t we pin anything on the damn woman yet, to get her out of the way? Christ!” he exploded, “I’m trying to run a bloody war and this silly little business is getting up my nose!”

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to clean up this mess immediately Al,” the brigadier declared, “but I think we have to tread very carefully. As you say, do we know the full plot here? I think it could be counter productive to jump in now. Let’s stick to our present strategy and see what develops. I believe the woman’s out of harm’s way at the moment, I don’t think Simpson’s in any more danger than what he is every day anyway. The only front we could perhaps move on is Swanker now that he’s about ready to leave hospital.”

“Yes, you’re right! Paul, get the MPs to debrief him, hit the bastard hard, find out just what he’s divulged to the woman. We can’t charge the damn fool right now so send him to Vung Tau to count blankets! At least then he’ll be out of my sight.”

“Yes sir. I’ll arrange it.”

“And Paul, I want Simpson protected, discreetly, wherever he goes. I couldn’t live with myself if he came to grief.”

The MPs put the major through the mincer. They questioned him solid for four days and nights in a special room in the hospital where the major was laying uncomfortably on his stomach. He didn’t believe Jilly was a spy, he wailed; no, she never had access to Top Secret or operational files; no, he had never told her anything about Australia’s field operations or anybody’s else’s operations . . .

“Not even inadvertently major? While whispering sweet nothings on the love nest?”

“No!”

“Or after she’d gone down on you?”

“No!”

“Or during the whippings she gave you? You enjoyed that especially, didn’t you major.”

“Noooo!” he wailed.

The MPs concluded that Swanker really had no idea what he had said or done, such was the fantasy world in which he lived. They reported to Big Al that it was best to assume his tongue had wagged like a Labrador pup’s tail.

Immediately on discharge from hospital Major Three-Bob was put on the Wallaby and flown to Vung Tau supply base to command blanket store section. His personal possessions, he was told, were already there waiting for him.

As he sat in his Q store in Vung Tau, Major Three-Bob slowly regained his composure. His career was finished and the threat of court martial hung over him. The MPs had told him that was a distinct possibility, pending further investigations. He began to fume. It was Jilly, she had ruined him, his career, his life. All her fault. “I’ll kill that fucking bitch if it’s the last thing I do,” he swore. “After all, what have I got to lose?” Thoroughly depressed, poisoned by self-pity, he decided to change into civilian clothes and go into town to lose himself. Maybe this time a bargirl would be a hell of a lot safer, he thought.

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In Saigon, General Cassidy was pacing his office furiously. “I knew, I knew it!” he raged. “This has to be the work of those Langley bastards. Operation Santa Claus — what sort of a fucking name is that, dammit! What the fuck is going on? Why haven’t I been told! I’m supposed to be running the fucking world here!”

Natasha stood near his desk, fearful. She had never seen him in such a rage. She had just passed on to him the information she had gleaned from Dong about Operation Santa Claus.

“Who the hell does this Simpson guy think he is? Assassinate Ho Chi Minh, my arse! The Company’s been trying to do that for years!”

Cassidy ranted and raved for five minutes before calming down. He had to find out what was going on inside the brains trust at Langley, the CIA

headquarters. And there was only one person there he could trust. It was the only way. In the meantime, Natasha had to get whatever information she could. “You wanna see America girl, you find out what the hell’s goin’ on here with these bloody Australians!”

***

The film team arrived at Nui Dat in the middle of a monsoonal downpour which continued all day, varying at times from sheets of water to a steady drizzle. Filming was impossible.

They were met by Major Ian Forward, the OC of the Nui Dat PR Unit, who suggested a visit to 3RAR.

"They're letting off steam in a big way, so I'm told. They've been in country 120 days and have spent 100 of those in the boonies, so I suppose they've got good justification," he said.

The regiment was holding what it called a mini-Olympics. It was an extraordinary sight, hundreds of soldiers, wet through but totally oblivious to the discomfort, cheering and shouting their mates as they battled through mud and slush.

Every one of them had a can in hand which, judging by their humor, was certainly not the first. And there were still heaps to come. Although each man in Nui Dat was rationed to two cans a day, beer was not allowed on operations so was saved for just such an occasion as this.

Donkey met four blokes he had worked with in Sydney and they promised him a good night down at the boozer, as it was termed at the Dat.

Donkey was particularly struck by the friendliness of the troops at Nui Dat. They lived in either mud or dust, depending on the season; it was always hot and dry or hot and humid — and that meant wet. They camped throughout their twelve-month tour in four-man tents surrounded by a sandbag wall, slept on stretchers and had virtually no cupboard space apart from ammo boxes or suchlike that they had scrounged. All their gear was kept in their heavy metal trunks. Despite the strains that this inevitably placed on relationships, the camaraderie among the troops was extraordinary. Donkey envied them. Saigon could be so bitchy.

Major Forward told Donkey to bunk in the wooden pre-fabricated Press Hut the PR team used as its headquarters. The officers' lines, toilets and showers were close by and the major told Donkey to use them. While the sergeants quarters were only one hundred yards away, the ORs lines were

more than half a mile down a muddy track and he thought it better if the film crew was kept reasonably close together, for convenience sake.

"Just keep a low profile and the officers will think you're a correspondent," the major warned Donkey. "If they find out you're a baggy arse private they'll scream blue murder and want you removed from their lily-white midst."

"Won't they twig when they see me wandering over to the ORs mess and boozer?"

"Not necessarily. A lot of correspondents want to talk to the Diggers and those two places are the best — everyone's usually there at the one time. Of course, we have to watch what the Diggers tell them and what the journos write."

"National security?"

"Something like that."

"Yeah, I've heard that one before."

"Since that guy flew out of Saigon to Hong Kong a couple of months ago and filed that story about the four Australian newsmen being killed we've had to be particularly wary."

"Yeah, I heard that story. I suppose so."

"Anyway, if you get into any strife, refer your trouble to me."

Donkey met his mates in the Headquarters Company boozer around seven o'clock.

They were Army clerks, like Donkey, and never left the Nui Dat base. Unlike their sometimes distant cousins, the fighting troops, they didn't have the opportunity to save their beer rations and had to make do with their prescribed “two cans per man per day” and supplement it with whatever else they could scrounge from non-drinkers or through bribery.

Donkey and his four mates settled over their cans of VB and began comparing notes. Donkey told them all about Saigon. They thought his life in the capital particularly exciting compared to their dull, daily routine.

Donkey was fascinated to hear of the occasional VC mortar attacks on the base which sent everyone scurrying for slit trenches which dotted Nui Dat.

"And this weather is just perfect for them to creep in close and lob a few in," he was told. "It's an absolute bastard, too, because all the trenches at this time of the year are filled with slimy, stinking water. Most of us would prefer to take our chances with the mortar shells than dive into that stinking shit."

Once those topics had been exhausted the conversation moved, as it always did, to news of mates with which one or another had lost contact, and then

news from home, whether that be Sydney, Melbourne or Coober Pedy. Everyone was always hungry for news from home and when such conversations arose, inevitably the group would grow in numbers.

Six or seven others drifted into Donkey's group in case there was something in the conversation that interested them, and to make their contribution.

There were always friendly arguments over football — Australian rules versus rugby union versus rugby league versus soccer — cricket, horse racing, car racing. Sometimes there was even talk about politics and the war, although not often because it just seemed so bloody pointless.

"You blokes will be interested in this." The speaker was a stranger to Donkey. He was searching his pockets for something. "Ah, here it is." He pulled a grubby, mud-stained letter from the side pocket on a trouser leg.

"I got it from my girlfriend today." He ran a finger over the letter until he found what he wanted to read. "Listen to this. *There was another big anti-Vietnam war demonstration in the city today. I saw it on the TV news tonight. I really don't understand it but there were thousands of people waving North Vietnamese and Viet Cong flags, placards everywhere and some famous politician or other leading them. There was a bit of a fight, too, and the police arrested four or five, the news said. Anyway, your mum told me . . .'* no, she goes on to something else there."

The comments flew . . .

"Fucking Jim Cairns. I'll bet he was the prick leading that demo."

"I'd love to shoot that bastard. Just one bullet."

"That would be too quick for him. I'd make the arsehole suffer. A bayonet in the guts."

"That would be fair enough. He's kicking us in the guts."

"Fair dinkum, I can't understand some of those people."

"They are right in one sense, we shouldn't fucking-well be here."

"Right! We all know that, but running around waving NVA and Charlie flags?"

"I'd like to shoot a few of those bastards too."

"The way those pricks are carrying on you would think we actually liked it over here."

"Fucking lovely to have all the people back home right behind us, isn't it."

"Most of them are."

"Are they? Those fucking demos seem to be getting bigger and bigger."

"Well, it's not our fucking fault we're here. The Government says 'go' you fucking well go. That's all there is to it."

"I'd love to bring some of those bastards over here and show 'em the real world. Show 'em some bodies . . ."

"Australian bodies."

"Yeah, with their guts layin' out on the ground."

"You know, there's been over two hundred Diggers killed over here so far — and for what? For those flag-waving shits back home?

"I wonder how the blokes feel who have to go home with no legs, no balls, to that sort of reception?"

"I know how I'd feel. I'd want my rifle back."

"Yeah, and then you'd spend the rest of your life in jail for murder . . ."

"What these fuckwits are doing is worse than murder, it's fucking treason!"

"You know, I don't mind so much those people who are opposed to Australia being involved in Vietnam. I don't think there's many of us who would disagree with them. It's a waste of fucking time, lives and everything else. . ."

"That's right."

"But what I do object to is those bastards supporting our enemy. You know, the point is not whether we should be here or not. The fact is we are. That's *THE* fact of life. And those fucking people ought to be supporting us, not the fucking enemy. I hear they're even sending aid to Hanoi!"

"And to think that I voted for that bastard Cairns and his mob at the last election."

"Hang on, hang on! Jim Cairns isn't waving VC flags from what I've heard. Let's get his part in all this straight. He's simply opposed to us being here and wants us home. You can't accuse the bloke of supporting Ho Chi Minh."

"Maybe not, but he's leading people who are."

"Some are, yeah. But surely, most — the vast majority, in fact, I would think anyway — are marching simply to try to convince Gorton and his bloody mob to get us out of here. For instance, I don't think you could accuse that mob of women — what do they call themselves?"

"SOS — Save Our Sons."

"Yeah, that lot. I don't think you could accuse them of marching for Hanoi. Their motive is as simple as their name, surely."

"Yet they still associate with ratbags chanting 'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh'."

"I don't suppose they can do much about that."

"Ah fuck it! What's the point of talking about it. What can we do about it?"
"That's the hard part, isn't it. Nothing! Absolutely fucking nothing!"

CHAPTER 19

"What'll I say?" The soldier holding the microphone limply near his chest was a big man, six foot three with shoulders as broad as an axe handle. He was obviously strong and rugged, a man who would be held in high esteem by the rest of his rifle platoon. His business was soldiering and he looked as though he would be good at it. Yet with a microphone swallowed in his huge hands he was like a frightened little puppy.

"Well, you could start off with 'gday mum and dad'," suggested Colonel West a little sarcastically, before mellowing, appreciating the soldier's nervousness and discomfort. "Just relax, act natural and talk to your family just like you do at home. . ."

"Yeah Dumbo, like 'Hey mum, pass the fuckin' sauce'!" chipped in one of the Digger's mates. Hoots of raucous laughter followed the crack.

"There's always a smart-arse!" snapped Wacker Crawley to the grinning interjector who was leaning on a shovel waiting for his turn in front of the camera.

It was the film team's first day at work outside the Nui Dat base. They had been driven by Land Rover that morning to an area called the Horseshoe, a clearing almost the size of a football field on top of an extinct volcano. It bristled with artillery surrounded by sandbag walls about three feet high. The hilltop was circled by roll upon roll of barbed wire. Slit trenches and foxholes slashed burrows and furrows in the red earth.

The heat was fierce yet few of the soldiers wore a shirt. Brown backs tended guns, dug trenches and built sandbag fortifications in a slow, steady rhythm. At first glance they reminded Donkey of a road repair gang back home but he soon realised the suffocating heat and humidity would not allow them to work any faster. Evenings, and shade, were blessed reliefs.

Colonel West had decided to leave the decision as to who did Christmas messages up to a unit's commanding officer. Obviously everyone couldn't do so. Most of the Diggers were camera shy and in many cases it was a case of "you, you and you" being volunteered to face the lens. The exception were the married men with young families. They were very keen to say Merry Christmas. Some were quite good, others terrified but determined to have a go.

The big bloke who now held the mike was one of the latter.

"Okay," said Crawley, "you got it? G'day, Merry Christmas and all that?"

The big bloke nodded, somewhat dubiously.

"Right. Rolling!"

The words came out with a rush. "G'day-mum-and-dad-I'd-like-ter-say-Merry-Christmas-see-ya."

"Cut!" cried Bernie Longhurst. "You can speak through your kneecap, can you Digger?"

The big bloke looked down at his knees, puzzled. His hands were beside them, the mike in his left.

"Oh, sorry," he muttered. He lifted the mike quickly and planted it firmly against his chin just as the platoon clown had another crack.

"And now, the Digger with the talking Gerry Gee!"

The comedian got his laughs — and a threat from his big, suffering mate. “Shut up you little bastard or I'll smash ya fuckin' head in!" he swore loudly. He still had the mike pinned firmly to his chin and Longhurst still had on the earphones he used to check voice levels. The shouted threat almost burst his eardrums. He leapt into the air, ripping at the headset to get it off. He was not at all amused.

The audience was. Their mirth doubled at the sight of Longhurst leaping about with his hands over his ringing ears, his teeth fixed in a deathly grimace and his eyes squeezed shut.

"Christ all fucking mighty," groaned Crawley, "what have we got here?"

"A total IQ of fucking zero!" snarled Longhurst, rescuing his earphones from the dust.

The platoon's officer admonished his men. He could see the film crew were getting uptight, although he too, found it difficult to wipe the smile from his face.

The big bloke had another go.

"G'day mum and dad I'd like ter say Merry Christmas an'. . ."

He became lost for words. The silence was deafening. He stood like an Easter Island statue, mouth open, frozen. Suddenly he snapped his head around to Colonel West. "Shit, sir, I dunno what ter s. . ."

"Cut!" cried Longhurst.

"Shit!" said Crawley.

"Ha! ha! ha!" roared the audience.

"I dunno what ter say, sir!" mimicked the clown.

"Fuck it!" snarled the big fella, slamming the mike down on Donkey's clipboard, turning on his tormentor. "I warned you, ya little bastard!"

The tormentor fled, the tormented lumbering hotly in pursuit. Their mates had collapsed into the dust shaking with mirth.

"We can't have this lieutenant!" barked a furious Colonel West. "I don't have the time or the film to waste. If every unit was as undisciplined as yours I'd be lucky to get fifty Diggers on film, let alone the three hundred that Canberra has ordered!"

The colonel's "undisciplined" sideswipe stung the young lieutenant into anger. He quickly got his troops together under threats of double sand-bagging duties. But the big fella's pride had been deeply wounded. There was no way he was going to pick up that mike again.

"Forget him then," ordered Colonel West. "We'll go on with the others. Donkey, indicate to Canberra on that running sheet that they might be able to salvage something from what that soldier said if they edit it before the shit . . . I mean, where he said 'shit'."

The other ten soldiers did their messages well enough with some prompting.

"Thank God that's over!" sighed Crawley loudly. He had no qualms about letting anybody know his exact feelings. It was just a chore, no big deal.

"Ah, sir . . ." It was the big fella. He'd sidled up to Colonel West quietly.

"Yes private?"

"I'd like to have another go, if you don't mind sir. I've got this girl, at home, you see and a coupla kids, and, well, I'd like to have another go. Sorry about before sir, I won't muck it up this time."

"Are you sure you can do it?"

"I'd like to have a go, sir."

"All right. You've got one take. If you stuff it up, that's it. Take the mike. Now, do you know what you're going to say?"

"Yes sir."

"Right. And no swearing!"

"No sir."

"When you're ready sergeant."

"Okay . . . rolling!"

"G'day mum and dad, kids, Annette. As you can see we're out in the bush at the moment protecting these guns you can see behind us. It's pretty hot but apart from that we're all fit and well. I wish I could be at home for Christmas,

we all do I suppose, but I can't so all I can do is wish you all a Merry Christmas and a happy New Year. And this is the next best thing to being home, I s'pose, with you all, sittin' around the table with the turkey, roast pork, the plum pud, the presents around the tree . . ."

His voice began to falter, break, his eyes glistening. But there was no laughing now. All eyes were glued to the big fella, lumps rising, jamming throats.

". . . I miss you all very much . . . I love you all very much . . . Merry Christmas." His head dropped to hide his eyes.

"Cut," murmured Crawley. He walked around from behind his camera and took the mike gently from the big fella, patting him on the shoulder.

"Thanks mate, that's the best we've done."

The big, bronzed Anzac thrust his hands in his pockets and shuffled away, kicking gently at the dust with his right boot, head still down, hiding, he thought, his tears. One by one his mates broke away from their group and followed him. The smart-arse soon stood alone, head bowed. He turned to Colonel West.

"You know sir, I wish like hell I'd been able to say something like that."

CHAPTER 20

Major Three-Bob was on his sixth double scotch in Fanny's Bar when a familiar face walked into the smoky gloom surrounding him and the bargirl perched on his knee.

Nickoli recognised him first. "Hello major, fancy seeing you here."

"By God, Nickoli isn't it? Sit down mate, sit down."

"Thanks major, but . . ."

"No, no, no lad. No formalities here. I'm in civvies, you're in civvies, can't see any badges of rank anywhere, can you?" He grinned crookedly. "Good! Papasan, a drink for my friend here!" Even though Nickoli was just a trashy corporal, a nobody, Swanker knew that as the brigadier's secretary there was just a chance he might prove useful.

Nickoli sat down, honored he could share a drink with the major. Unlike Donkey Simpson and many other ORs, Nickoli had some sympathy for Major Swanker. He felt he had been persecuted, like himself, quite unfairly by his peers, by every bastard in fact. The major poured him a generous three fingers of his Johnnie Walker Black over ice and sat back. A bargirl slopped on to the seat beside Nickoli and began pawing him. "You buy me Saigon tea," she purred.

"No!" snapped Nickoli.

"Here, allow me!" volunteered the major.

"Thank you sir."

"Hey, no badges of rank here, eh! What was your Christian name again, just slipped my mind. John! Right, of course, John. Call me Horace. Named after Horatio, bless my dear old mum. Must have known I was headed for military life. Ha ha. Anyway John, what brings you to beautiful downtown Vung Tau?"

"R&C sir, sorry, I mean Horace. I'm staying at the Badcoe Club. And you, ah, Horace?"

Swanker looked at Nickoli darkly. "They transferred me here, the bastards. But I thought you would have known that, being the COS secretary."

"Well, yes, but personnel matters are confidential, you know," replied Nickoli prissily.

"Don't give me that bullshit John. The general's got it in for me, I know. Do you know what I'm doing now? Counting fucking blankets! Me, an Intelligence officer! What I'd like to know is what I did to deserve this. I nearly got blown to bits and what do I get for it? I get buried in the boonies, that's what. No purple heart for this little black duck, just a couple of purple scars on my arse." He turned to Nickoli, refilling both their glasses, ignoring the women fawning over them. "What I'd like to know John, is what the fuck's going on? How come I've been ostracised? You're in the general's office, why are they doing this to me? What the fuck did I do wrong?"

Nickoli was not much of a drinker and the two large glasses of scotch he had thrown down quickly while Swanker was talking had gone straight to his head. "I'm not sure I know any of the answers Horace. The general and the brigadier have been keeping things rather close to their chests lately. In fact, there are some files which they have been deliberately passing around me."

"That's odd, isn't it?"

"I think so. Especially when they're passed through that upstart, smartarse Nasho Harding. That arse'ole has taken over my office. But I'll tell you this: something is going on that they're trying to keep secret. And I'm sure it involves that prick Simpson."

"Simpson! So he's no friend of yours either John."

"I owe him one. "

"That's interesting. So do I. He made things very difficult for me with the SITREP, the bastard. He set me up with the general several times."

"He humiliated me. I'm going to get that bastard if it's the last thing I do."

"An interesting idea. Maybe we'd make a good team John. I'd be more than willing to help you stitch up the bastard."

"Maybe, just maybe, we could do that Horace, because I reckon he's porking that Jilly sheila who used to work for you."

"He's *what!*" Swanker's savage reaction surprised Nickoli, who backed off.

"Well, I'm not absolutely sure, you understand, but he's been pretty pally with her since she moved down to the PR office. It wouldn't surprise me one little bit if he's into her pants. And she seems fairly keen on him, too."

Swanker's feelings of outraged jealousy and hatred boiled together. The number one and two people on his hate list, in bed together! He decided that Nickoli's appearance in the bar had been pre-destined, that opportunity was presenting itself to him through Nickoli, that he could exact revenge, sweet revenge, maybe in the one fell blow. It was time to take Nickoli on board, to

use him to achieve his own ends. He had to take him into his confidence.

"John, I'm sure I can trust you. Can I trust you?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Because I'm about to tell you something which is super secret and which almost certainly ties in with why you and I are being persecuted." He looked around the bar surreptitiously before leaning closer to Nickoli. "Did you know Jilly is a VC spy?"

"A spy?"

"Fair dinkum. That's probably part of the information that's being kept from you. The general and the brigadier know, they're trying to nail her, but without much success."

"I don't believe it!"

"You better believe it, if you know what's good for you. She tried to kill me when I found out. She planted the bomb in my office. Everybody thinks it was just an aimless hit and run tactic by the VC. I know better. It wasn't. It was Jilly, trying to kill me. I know too much."

"But if the general and brigadier know it was her, why don't they arrest her?"

"She's got powerful connections, right up to President Thieu himself. They have to catch her red-handed and then they have to keep it quiet. They'd look damn fools having a spy in the middle of their operations, wouldn't they!"

"Yes, I suppose they would. No wonder I haven't seen the files. I'll bet only the general and brigadier have."

"They're not going to advertise their incompetence, are they."

"No. Wow. This is fantastic! Are you sure of all this?"

"Absolutely." Swanker suddenly had a second thought, one that he knew would seal Nickoli in any scheme he might conjure. "And let me add this: your guess about Simpson being involved in this somewhere is dead right. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if he's a spy as well. The general and brigadier have him under close watch but so far haven't been able to nail him either. I believe we can. Now, do you want to get Simpson?"

"Unbelievable! Yes, obviously, I'd love to see Simpson court martialled." Nickoli had never heard sweeter words in his life. Here was the perfect opportunity to prove his worth to his doubting brigadier, the man he idolised.

"And I want to get Jilly, ah, for my own reasons . . . to, ah, re-establish myself and my reputation. So, let's look at how we do so. I think the way to get to Simpson is to get to Jilly first."

"How do we do that?"

"Well, I'm persona non grata in Saigon at the moment so we have to get her down here. That shouldn't be too much of a problem. She's got a villa in Vung Tau which I just happen to know very well. Maybe you could help me lure her here. I'd like to have a few words with that young lady and, maybe, have a bit of fun on the side." He grinned broadly. Nickoli looked a little nervous but nodded vigorously.

"Now John, I'm sure these young ladies here would be more than willing to entertain us for the remainder of the night." He put up his hand to silence Nickoli's intended protest. Nickoli was too tight to pay for it, especially when a wank was free. "No, no, it's on me, partner. Let's have ourselves a ball. Okay?"

Nickoli grinned crookedly and nodded. "Let's go fuck ourselves silly," he smirked, the mouse on his top lip twitching excitedly.

"And make some plans. Let's not forget the plans." Swanker was drunk, Nickoli nearly legless. The scotch bottle was empty.

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"I know they spent the night together, sir," Errington told Big Al, "so I think we can safely assume the woman is trying her hardest to get information from Simpson."

Big Al grinned. "I think she's going to be fairly frustrated, Corporal Errington."

"Not if Donkey has anything to do with it sir."

"That interpretation was not what I had in mind corporal. Are you sure Simpson knows nothing of what is going on?"

"Yes sir. If he had any suspicions I'm sure he would have talked to me."

"Now we must try to anticipate what she will do next. If she can't get the information she needs from Simpson, where will she look?"

"Perhaps she needs some guidance sir?"

"Just what I had in mind, corporal. Do you have the Operation Santa Claus file there? Good. Time to insert another phase — and I'm sure General Dong will be interested too."

***

Frustrated by her inability to get anything out of Donkey before he left for Nui Dat, Jilly was at her wit's end as to what to do next. And she was

wondering about herself. Her feelings for Donkey were beginning to make her uneasy. He had been gone only two days and she was missing him, deep inside. She asked herself if she was falling in love with her handsome Australian spy. *No!* she told herself vehemently, spies do not fall in love! They use people, even kill people, they don't fall in love with the enemy, particularly an enemy spy! She sighed heavily. She really wasn't very good at this sort of thing at all. She began to doubt herself, her commitment to the cause, the cause itself. She even began to doubt whether Donkey was a spy. It would be very convenient, she thought happily, if he wasn't. That would be nice. That might change everything. But no, that couldn't be either. Nothing made any sense. Even in his guise as a Russian advisor, how was he going to get into Hanoi? He didn't speak the language. Or did he? Maybe they intended to drop him on top of Ho's house by parachute. But he wasn't a paratrooper. Or was he? How would they get him out once the deed had been done? Or did they have no intention of getting him out? Was his mission one way?

That very thought sent a shiver of horror down her spine. *I am falling for him,* she was forced to admit to herself. *No, no! It is impossible! I must stop this!* She had to find out more. But what could she do next? Donkey was in Nui Dat going through his special training under the pretext of filming Christmas messages but that's all she knew. She knew not the how, where or when of his mission and time was running out.

The file! The Operation Santa Claus file! How could she get at it again. Surely it would now contain more information which she could use. By now it might even have full details. She had been very lucky the first time she had looked through it. It was only because Errington trusted her that she had been able to sneak a look at it. She knew such files were always under lock and key or passed hand to hand by only senior officers or staff with top security clearances and there were precious few of those.

She knew Errington was one. She thought momentarily of seducing him and dismissed it almost as quickly. She remembered she had tried him when she had first come to work for Intelligence — after all, he was one of them, Asian, sort of — but he had not been interested at all. It made her mad but her anger had been quickly dispelled when Swanker made it so easy for her to climb into his bed, to milk secrets from him.

Harding! Surely he would have the highest security clearance. He would know! And he had made it perfectly obvious in the past that he would be very

interested in getting into her pants. But it would have to be fast, maybe even tonight.

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It took the officers two days to find out they had a poxy private in their midst and not a foreign correspondent. They lodged their objections with Major Forward, chorusing "unclean, unclean!"

"We'll have to move you out," the major told Donkey. "The pip-squeaks are squealing."

Donkey didn't mind. He had felt uneasy anyway, out of place. He was much more comfortable in a tent with his baggy arse mates — if you could call it comfortable. He found the heat intolerable and the beer always ran out hours too early.

As the days went by prickly heat rashes began creeping over his body, especially his arms, itching maddeningly. The backs of his hands and his neck were raw with sunburn. A yellow goo given to him by a medic relieved the stinging but failed to keep out further sun. He also had taken to wearing a bandana around his neck and buttoning his sleeves to the wrist like Crawley but the backs of his hands, which he couldn't protect, were burnt over and over again, day after day.

Sweat streamed down his arms over his wrists and on to his hands making it almost impossible to write on his clipboard. When his biro did manage to work his writing was immediately smudged with sweat and difficult to read.

Back in Nui Dat of an evening a new menace arose from the jungle and swamps, huge black mosquitos. And while they were firing in for the kill, the howitzers of the artillery regiments dotted around the camp would be spitting out death in the other direction.

They called it harassing fire, to keep Charlie on his toes. It certainly kept Donkey on his. There was no regular pattern to it, except that it went all night. The artillerymen would aim their guns at Spot X on the surrounding hills and give it a pounding every now and then. Twenty shells might be loosed off in the space of a couple of minutes, then there would be silence. The longer that lasted the more Donkey found himself anxiously awaiting the next one. And just when he thought that would be it for the night and he was dozing off, *crash!* off would go another one. Donkey found himself jumping around like a man with St Vitus' Dance.

The Nui Dat blokes thought it hilarious that every time there was a

thunderous roar of a howitzer Donkey would do a high jump on the spot.

"It's all right for you blokes," he sniffed, embarrassed, "but when we hear any noise like that in Saigon, we know its in-coming, not out-going."

The film crew worked on steadily, flitting from here to there either by Land Rover or helicopter. Donkey loved the helicopter trips, although he was extremely dubious at the start.

The RAAF pilots had something of a reputation as madmen, especially among the Americans. Donkey had had two experiences of their skill, one being the Wallaby flights where the pilots would stand their Caribous on the nose to land and on the tail taking off.

The other was in a helicopter taking off from the pad behind the Free World Building. General Melville Smith had decided that he wanted to see for himself an artillery position set up out in the bush supporting an infantry operation. At that time Donkey was still the general's secretary and Big Al had invited him along for the ride.

Stacked on board the chopper with the general and Donkey were most of the Australian Army's top brass based in Saigon.

Before taking off, the pilot had looked around at his passengers and muttered: "Bit overloaded, but we'll give it a fly." He had even guffawed at his own pun.

My God, though Donkey immediately, I'll volunteer to get off! The Huey shuddered off its skids and slowly gained height as it crept, thrashing loudly at the thick air, towards the compound's outer perimeter eight-foot chain-mail fence. Donkey was wondering, as it grew closer, whether the chopper was making height quickly enough. The pilot was wondering too.

"Shit!" he suddenly exclaimed, "we're going to trip over the fence."

When you hear something like that, Donkey thought later, its amazing just how much flashes through your mind in a few seconds. Trip over the fence! God, that means *crash!*No, he wouldn't dare crash with all this brass on board, surely! The Army wouldn't hear of it. This can't be the way I'm going to die — not in a bloody war! If I get shot, well okay, that's fair enough. That's how you're supposed to die in a war; or even get my balls blown off by a mine, or my arsehole rebored by a rocket or shell. That's fine according to the Articles of War, no questions asked. *Sorry 'bout dat. Sin Loi.* But to trip over a fence in a chopper? Not on!

"Made it!" triumphed the pilot as the skids slid a bare two inches over the coiled barbed wire topped defence in an inelegant little hop, dipping below

height again immediately after.

A huge collective sigh of relief seemed to push the chopper higher and they were on their way. Apart from that incident, the flight was uneventful.

Down at Nui Dat though, Donkey learned to appreciate not only the brilliance of the choppers but their pilots as well. He had to agree with the Yanks who were of the opinion that "them Goddamn Arzee pilots could fly a brick!"

The choppers had no doors. If you were sitting on the outside of the bench style seats which went across the cockpit you were about two inches away from an enormous free-fall, depending on what height the chopper was. There were seat belts but they were rarely used. Centrifugal force kept you well and truly anchored in your seat. One pilot had demonstrated this on one of their first trips out by placing an apple in the centre of the cockpit at their feet and then proceeding to fly at an angle of forty five degrees. Donkey was at the bottom of the downslope, hanging on to his seat with whitening knuckles. There was nothing between him and the ground a few thousand feet below. Donkey kept darting his glance between that enormous abyss and the apple, expecting it, at least, to roll down the cockpit floor and into that great free-fall. It might, at least, hit a Charlie on the head, he mused. But it didn't move. Not an inch. Even when the pilot reversed his flight angle and Donkey found himself on the topside (much better, he thought) the apple stayed stock still, as though glued to the floor. Donkey felt just a little relieved after that amazing demonstration. He wasn't going to fertilise the rice paddies below after all.

The first time the camera broke down Donkey talked Major Forward into letting him go out into the bush with a pen and a notebook to report on a job Civil Affairs had asked the PR Unit to cover.

Near a small Vietnamese village the Engineers had built a bridge across a creek to help the villagers get to market during the monsoon season when the creek usually flooded, isolating them.

It was a day of great pomp and ceremony. The Engineers were mightily proud of their work, Civil Affairs were chuffed with their “winning hearts and minds” initiative and the village leader was puffed up with importance and delight.

Locals and Australians posed side by side, cut ribbons and shook hands while Matt Hillingham, who had flown down from Saigon especially for the assignment, flashed away with his camera. Everybody was happy, except the

bored commander of a 50-ton Centurion tank which had been sent to the village as a minder for the dignitaries in case Charlie decided to invite himself along for the party and throw grenades instead of riceballs.

When the official opening was over and everybody had retired to the village common for tea and rice cakes, it was time for the tank to return to Nui Dat.

Normally the tank commander would have charged his monster straight through the now shallow creek and gone on his merry way. His reasoning on this occasion was "why do it the hard way?" He rumbled off towards the bridge.

Attracted by the noise, the chief bridge engineers glanced up casually to watch the beast depart —and almost had a seizure.

"Oh no!" he shouted. He sprang to his feet and began chasing the monster, waving his arms frantically. When the other engineers saw what was going on they, too, hared off in hot pursuit of their frantic leader. The Civil Affairs people and the Vietnamese villagers wondered what all the fuss was about.

The chief engineer was only ten feet behind the tank when it rumbled on to the bridge. But the tank commander, earphones clamped over his head, was looking to his front, not behind. The engineer's frantic waving and shouting had been in vain. He skidded to a stop and held his breath while the tank rumbled further on to the bridge, its timbers creaking and groaning under the enormous weight.

The Centurion was almost across when the right main support beam began groaning loudly before splintering. The tank's right front track splashed into the creek, the bridge twisting beneath it, then the rest of it collapsed in a cracking shriek as the tank spluttered and sank into the creekbed, water lapping almost to the top of its tracks.

The few seconds of silence which followed was shattered by a roar from the enraged chief engineer.

"You stupid fucking bastard!” he ranted. “The bloody bridge wasn't built for that fucking great thing! What sort of an idiot are you . . !" His voice choked off in rage and despair. Speechless, he shook his clenched fists at the tank commander and jumped up and down on the spot.

The tank commander was equally enraged. He was stuck. There was no way he could get his tank out of the mess without the help of a tank recovery vehicle.

"Can't you bloody Engineers build anything right!" he yelled back at the

chief engineer. "Look at me fuckin' tank! Stuck! In the middle of this arse'oling pile of shit you called a bridge! Jesus Christ! You blokes should still be playing with Mechano sets!"

"It wasn't built for your fucking fifty ton monster! Surely common sense would have told you that!"

"Then why didn't you put up a no-tanks or load limit sign on this . . . this . . . cardboard cutout!" the tank commander spluttered.

Donkey and Matt killed themselves laughing all the way back to Nui Dat.

"What a story!" Donkey kept saying.

"Not forgetting my pictures!" chortled Matt.

Both knew it would be the funniest picture-story they'd never see in print.

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The following day, with the camera back in action, the film crew drove a borrowed Land Rover fifteen miles from Nui Dat to a village to get footage of an Australian doctor treating villagers for ailments of all sorts.

All around the doctors, women were squatting and chattering, toddlers screaming and little boys grinning. They appeared quite happy, despite their abject poverty.

These people, thought Donkey, surely are the ones we've come over on our white chargers to save. Honest, hard-working, friendly peasants. They were so different to the you-want-feelthy-pictures people who seemed to swarm all over Saigon in a corrupt mass.

The people in every village they visited were the same. They made Donkey feel ashamed of his intolerant attitude towards Vietnamese. Then again, these villages were not Saigon and these people were not Saigonese.

It was their last night in Nui Dat and to Donkey's surprise and delight, there was a party on at the boozer. Free beer and a smorgasbord of chicken and prawns. It was an amazingly late nine o'clock when the beer ran out and Donkey and his new-found mates headed back to their tents, full of good cheer, on a moonless, inky black night. He couldn't see two feet in front of him but he knew if he followed the others closely he would be all right. They seemed to know the well-worn track from boozer to tent as well as a blind man knows his own lounge room.

An almighty thunderous roar exploded all around Donkey as another shell speared off towards the Long Hai hills. He jumped with fright — and disappeared.

The man behind Donkey thought he saw him jump.

"Ha!" he yelled to the others, "the bargirl bandit's dancin' again!"

And then he noticed Donkey had disappeared.

"Hey, where's he gone?" He began shuffling around with his boots, trying to find a body on the ground. There was a splash near his right boot. He twigged.

"HA! The silly bastard has danced right into a fox-hole!" The group roared laughing while Donkey splashed and slithered around in the watery, muddy slime.

"Help me out ya pack a bastards!" he begged over their laughter. "Why didn't you tell me there was a bloody foxhole there!"

They bent down over the fox-hole. "Phew! You stink! You've sure stirred up a mess of shit down there, mate."

"Help me out! I can't get out!" Every time Donkey tried, he slithered back down again.

"What? And mess up our nice clean clothes?"

"Yeah, wash your hands first and then we'll give you a hand up."

They were so helpless with laughter it took them five minutes to extract Donkey from the hole. And by the time he resurfaced, covered in slime and mud, he had attracted an audience of about fifty Diggers.

"POOH!" came a shout through the laughter, "do all Saigon pogos stink like that?"

***

It had been a waste of time taking Harding to bed. It had been so simple getting him there, just a flutter or two of her eyebrows and he was panting like a puppy. But he had known nothing. She had cooked him dinner, filled him with French red wine and seduced him soon after. He was a big boy but he knew nothing of loving. Just push push push bang! and it was all over. Four times.

And then there had been the totally unexpected knock on the door. She had gone to it warily, asking who was there.

"Dong." was the flat reply. She had opened the door to see the general, dressed in a western business suit, standing on her porch. He smiled as she stood blocking the door, so surprised to see him. He had never come to her home before.

"May I come in?" he spoke softly in Vietnamese.

"No!" she blurted. And then apologised. "I have Australian general's secretary for dinner. It would be unwise. Most unwise. He would recognise you. Why are you here?" She looked over her shoulder anxiously.

"Ah," the general acknowledged. "Many pardons. It was just that I have not heard from you for several days. What are you doing? Where is my information? It has never been this long before."

"My general, have I let you down before?" she hissed quietly before remembering she had once, over the bombing of Swanker. She changed her tack. "Have I not given to you the best information of any spy in the country? My general, there is more coming, and soon, and even bigger than the last, much much bigger, but not yet. It is not ready yet." She flicked her eyes back over her shoulder, indicating Harding. "Maybe tonight a little more, maybe tomorrow a little more again. But not yet. Not yet. Now you must go. Quickly! You must trust me!"

"Yes but . . ."

"My general, please go! Now! It is too dangerous." She stepped back inside, off the porch, gently closing the door in his face. He had no choice but to turn on his heel and disappear into the night.

"Who was that?" Harding asked her.

"Just a neighbour. Wanting favours. They think that because I work for Uc Dai Loi I can get for them anything they want. Bah!" she spat testily.

From her subtle questioning of Harding throughout the night she ascertained that he did have the highest security clearance but had never even heard of a file on any Operation Santa Claus. "You know, is called what Donkey is doing now. Making movies, for Christmas, for your television."

"Oh, that. I didn't know that had a file or operational codename. Nothing to do with us, anyway. That's a PR matter."

She had tried coming back to the point many times from many different angles and eventually had to stop. He was becoming suspicious.

"Hey, what's with all the questions anyway? What are you, a spy or something?" He laughed. She giggled. Nervously.

"Mata Hari," she murmured, gently easing his flaccid penis into her mouth, forcing him to change his thought pattern. "Come on big boy, time to rise for Jilly again," she purred.

"Jesus," Harding sucked in his breath as her tongue caressed him, "I'll give you this: you're a fuckin' goer."

When Jilly walked into the PR office the next morning she knew she was

back to square one. There had to be another way. There was. To her absolute astonishment she got her hands on the Operation Santa Claus file again in exactly the same way as she had the first time. She was eating her lunch in the office; everyone else was out; Errington walked in with the file and put it into the colonel's 'in' tray and walked out, cracking a joke about the now well-known lunchtime drinking habits of the colonel. He wanted to go to lunch too, he said, and stuff the rules about hand-to-hand passing of top secret files. “Don’t tell anybody,” he warned, winking at her conspiratorially.

Jilly waited two minutes before she raced over to the colonel's desk and grabbed the file. She couldn't believe her luck. She turned the first sheet, marked "Operation Santa Claus, Phase One". That dealt with filming of the Christmas messages. She turned to the second sheet, marked "Phase Two" which detailed the proposal to kill Ho Chi Minh. She had read both of these. But now the file had a third page, headed "Phase Three". It read:

The overall objective of Operation Santa Claus can now be put into effect. It is the complete subjugation of Vietnam, north and south, by the US, as a total puppet state. The Americans know they are losing the war, losing their foothold in Asia, and this operation has been designed to turn that situation around.

The assassination of Ho Chi Minh will begin the demoralisation of the people of the north. It is felt by Washington that once North Vietnam loses its leadership — and maybe Uncle Ho is just the first — then it will crumble.

But the Americans acknowledge they still have a problem in the south, that despite everything they have done for the democratic country, they do not trust its leadership because it is acting in its own interests or that of America. It has therefore been decided to permit Vice President Ky to be assassinated as well. Targeting President Thieu would be too destabilising at this point.

However, if the US was seen to be behind these acts it would receive worldwide condemnation, unjustified though that might be, and would put at risk the future of democracy in Asia. Worse, the world might demand the Americans pay Vietnam compensation. That would damage US business beyond repair.

This is why Captain Simpson will be the agent of destruction. He is not an American and soon any record of his existence as an Australian will be destroyed. He will cease to exist. He will have no connection with any country, any ally or the US. If he fails, if he is caught, he will be totally anonymous, the ultimate Unknown Soldier.

Captain Simpson is currently being programmed on his missions at the Australian Task Force, Nui Dat. On completion, his instructions will be put into effect as soon as practicable.

Signed,

A. L. Melville-Smith

Commander, Australian Force Vietnam

Jilly sat staring at the page, numbed by what she had just read. She believed this was the American reaction to what she had caused to happen in Paris. The Americans were sick of playing games. She had to stop Donkey, but how? *When?* She had more information, but no more answers. In fact, if anything, her situation had grown worse, more frantic. Lost in her own forlorn thoughts, she didn't hear Nickoli walk into the office. She jumped involuntarily to her feet when he spoke.

"What are you doing sitting at the colonel's desk?" he demanded.

"Oh! Corporal! I, ar, I clean colonel's desk while he out at lunch. He say, Jilly this office is a mess. You clean it up for me. Book-oo mess. I clean." She looked down at the desk and began shuffling papers, trying to organise them into piles. The Operation Santa Claus file lay open on one end of the desk, the Top Secret stamp on its front hidden. She hoped Nickoli wouldn't move closer to the desk from where he stood at the door. She had never liked Nickoli, she considered him a worm and was horrified that this creep might be the one to blow her away.

But he stayed put. "I've got a message for you from Simpson," he snapped rudely. "Says he's in Vung Tau now for a few days doing Christmas messages and would like to meet you there. Have you got a house there or something?"

"Yes."

"He said he'd see you there tomorrow night, about seven o'clock after he knocks off. Said it was urgent. Told me not to tell anyone, as if I would," Nickoli snorted. "Said he *had* to see you. Made me promise I'd quote his exact words so here they are: *it is absolutely imperative I see you tomorrow night at your place in Vung Tau at seven o'clock.* There, that's exactly what he said."

"I no understand. Why he no ring me?"

"Said he couldn't trust the phones from down there. I was in Vungers on R&C and he spoke to me yesterday. I just got back this morning. Said not to try to ring him because he's out in the field all day anyway."

"Very strange."

"Hey look lady, I couldn't give a rat's arse whether you go to Vungers or not. I just promised to pass on a message." He sniggered, turning back towards the door. "Hope you have a wonderful time with lover boy, babe."

Jilly bridled. "You not nice. You Numbah Ten. You go away!"

"Just leaving, loveboat!"

What could he possibly want? she asked herself. And so urgently! Whatever it was, she had to go, immediately. She thought about leaving a note for General Dong telling him what she was doing but knew he was away up country organising a cinnamon shipment and wouldn't be back until the day after tomorrow. She decided against doing that for two reasons: she thought she would be back in Saigon before the general and, besides, she didn't trust that new Aide he had. The woman looked like a whore and probably was.

She told Colonel Pace she wouldn't be at work the next day because she had to visit a sick relative in Vung Tau, a poor excuse but she made the mistake of thinking it wouldn't matter if she didn't take the time to invent a better one.

As they walked past Colonel Dong's ground floor offices that evening on their way to the bus, Hillingham and Bassett joked about Jilly's mystery trip.

"You know who'll be in Vungers tomorrow, don't you?" Bassett smirked.

"The Donk."

"Right on. They're filming there. Very convenient, don't you think?"

"He's not giving it to our lovely Jilly is he?"

"Wouldn't be surprised. He's a sneaky bastard. And she seems very keen on him lately."

"Now you mention it, I have noticed her fawning over him."

"I reckon they might have arranged something in Vung . . ."

Natasha missed the rest of the sentence. They had walked past her window, out of earshot. But she had heard enough to set her alarm bells ringing. What was going on? Was Jilly going to Vung Tau to meet Simpson? To kill him even? Why? Whose side was Jilly really on? She had to find out, but how? She couldn't ask the woman straight out, but . . .

Charlie! He'd know! Or if he didn't he'd soon find out. She rushed out of her office to the stairs and climbed to the Australian Intelligence office on the fourth floor. The door was open but Errington was nowhere to be seen. She called his name but there was no answer. Where was he? Exasperated, she flopped into his chair at his desk and that's when she saw the file: Operation

Santa Claus. Top Secret.

Natasha’s eyes widened. This is what it was all about, sitting here right in front of her! She stared at the file, knowing it had the answers, yet afraid to open it. What if someone should come in, catch her reading it? For instance, Charlie? And yet she had to know! Her mind raced, the tips of her fingers tingled with the thrill of danger as she reached to open the file.

CHAPTER 21

Jilly arrived in Vung Tau mid-afternoon the next day. It was hot, as usual, but a gentle sea breeze cooled her as she stepped from her terrace directly on to the broad beach. The heat haze shimmered over the South China Sea making the humid air dance on white-topped waves. She spread a towel on the beach under a large umbrella and lay down, a brief bikini, broad brimmed western style straw hat with pink ribbon and suntan cream her only protection from the ferocity of the sun. Her European education had taught her not to fear the sun, as her compatriots did, but she still respected it. Her intention was to snooze there for no more than thirty minutes, have a quick swim, being careful to avoid the stinging bluebottle jellyfish, and then go back inside for a shower and siesta before preparing for Donkey's arrival at seven o'clock.

She lay on her stomach and thought about the strange message from Donkey. Why would he ask Nickoli to pass it on? He hated Nickoli. The only logical explanation was that he was the only person Donkey could find coming back to Saigon.

It had certainly blown any sort of secrecy Donkey might have wanted to retain about their relationship, she figured, but he would have known that. Nickoli's mouth was too big, he wouldn't be able to resist telling the world. Then again, maybe Donkey didn't care, maybe he loved her and didn't care who knew about it. Or maybe what he wanted to see her about, what he wanted to tell her, was just so important that it didn't matter.

She found herself hoping he loved her, truly loved her. Oh, how that would change things — and yet make her position impossible. She knew that all he had to do was say those magic words and her whole world would be tipped upside down. And yet he could not be allowed to do the terrible things he was, at this very moment, being trained to do. She agonised over her dilemma, knowing but not wanting to accept, that she had to kill him. Tonight.

The knock on the door came at precisely seven o'clock. She checked herself quickly in the full length mirror in her bedroom before answering it. She liked what she saw. She was wearing a full length Thai silk evening dress which shimmered from burnt orange to copper, depending on the light. The

bodice was tight, highlighting her perfect breasts, the deeply scalloped neckline tantalising, teasing. She wore no bra, didn't need it. The skirt also was tight over her small, shapely hips and round bottom, and split on the left leg to mid thigh. She wore no stockings, only white high heeled shoes. A thousand lights shot from her jet-black hair, piled on top of her head in a series of intertwining twirls then falling loosely down on to the back of her neck. Her make-up was light, just a touch of eye shadow and lipstick to match her dress. She knew she didn't need it. General Dong had once told her: "To Asian eyes you are not pretty, but to western eyes you are very beautiful. Do not forget that." She hadn't and she had used it.

She pushed lightly at her hair then, satisfied, turned and walked towards the door. The knocking came again, rapping quickly, even nervously. She hesitated momentarily, puzzled, then smiled. He's very impatient tonight, she thought. She opened the door.

The fist caught her flush in the middle of her forehead. Her head snapped back and the force of the blow lifted her bodily off the floor, sending her sprawling back on to the terracotta paving in the apartment's vestibule. Her head cracked loudly on the floor and excruciating, red, flashing pain swept her into blackness.

***

Vung Tau was civilisation again. Because nobody knew they were coming, or that's what they had been told anyway, accommodation had not been arranged for them but this Army stuff-up turned into a bonus. The film crew was put up at the R & C Centre, the Peter Badcoe Club. It was like the Hong Kong Hilton after coming from Nui Dat. Within minutes of moving in they were bathing in the luxury of the centre's swimming pool. There is heaven in hell, Donkey thought. And here the beer never ran out.

While the pace for the film crew had been a cracker at Nui Dat, it slowed considerably at the Vung Tau base. There were too many distractions, most centred around the Badcoe Club. They would swim of a morning before heading off to a unit to shoot film, return for lunch and another swim and knock off early afternoon to swim yet again before many pleasant beers and games of table tennis and pool in the recreation rooms. Occasionally they had a swim in the South China Sea, too, although nasties like bluebottles tended to take a bit of the fun out of that.

On Sunday they decided to break their routine and lunch in the resort town of Vung Tau itself. It was considerably cleaner than Saigon and boasted some

fine French restaurants.

Crawley selected one large double storey establishment which had a magnificent view over the harbor from the tables on the second floor. They had beers all round and a top class meal. It was a long lunch and the beer was cold. Bottle after bottle disappeared.

"Four more beers!" ordered Crawley.

"No, not for me," said the colonel, "I've had enough. I'll go for a walk and meet you blokes outside in ten minutes. Otherwise I'll come back up and drag you out."

After the colonel had left and the frosty bottles of local brew delivered, Crawley looked long and hard at the bottle, studying it.

"You know, the last time I was here I thought I had souvenired every type of bottle they make in this country, but I'm sure I haven't got one of these."

"Do you collect them or something?" asked Donkey.

"Yep. I reckon I've got one of the best bottle collections around."

"Why don't you nick one?"

"They might object."

"What? About one lousy bottle? You've got to be joking. I'll knock one off for you if you haven't got the guts."

"All right, great. Look, I'll go and pay the bill with Bernie and while they're busy looking after us you pick up a bottle and just wander out."

"Right. No hassle."

He was wrong. There was a hassle all right. Donkey got up from the table and stuck the bottle down the front of his trousers. It was held firmly by his belt but the top half was clearly visible outside his shirt. No matter, he thought and wandered casually towards the stairs. He was down four or five when a shout went up behind him. He looked around and saw that the Noggies were on to him so he took the stairs two at a time and ran out on to the street, slowing to a trot, not imagining for one moment that the proprietor would give chase just for the sake of an empty beer bottle. Mission accomplished, he thought.

But the little Vietnamese was not giving up. He barrelled out on to the footpath jabbering loudly, waving his arms around and gave chase. Alarmed, Donkey bolted along the footpath, dodging people as he ran. A corner was only thirty yards away. Safety!

He ran for it, only to see a White Mice appear around the same corner. The policeman heard his countryman screaming, saw Donkey running and

quickly drew his Colt 45.

"Dung Lai!" he shouted at Donkey. "Stop!" Donkey was trapped. He stopped dead in his tracks as the Mouse ran at him from one direction, pistol levelled, and the still jabbering restaurateur closed in from the other. Donkey could see Crawley and Longhurst following up the angry Vietnamese.

The White Mice ran right up to Donkey, yelling and screaming, and jabbed the enormous revolver into his stomach, hard. Donkey's instinctive reaction was to put his hands high in the air. He looked down at the weapon from the wild west and his stomach knotted.

"Here, take the bloody bottle," he stammered. The two Vietnamese didn't hear him. They were both jabbering away loudly, the restaurant owner at the White Mice and the White Mice at Donkey, poking the gun again and again into Donkey's stomach. He was becoming more terrified by the second. He was sure he was going to get a bullet in the guts. Crawley and Longhurst ran up and jumped into the conversation, telling the White Mice to put his gun away, telling him the man could have his bottle. The Nogs didn't understand or didn't want to understand. Neither would take the bottle, they wanted Donkey's hide instead. The three Australians were beginning to despair when up puffed the colonel.

"What's going on here!" he barked at the White Mice. "Take that weapon out of my soldier's stomach, man!"

Whether it was the colonel's sharp tone or his badges of rank that finally convinced the White Mice to lower his revolver Donkey couldn't tell. He didn't care either. The end result was all that mattered.

"Now, what is going on here?" he repeated. The two Vietnamese began jabbering again. He put his hand up and silenced them. He turned to Donkey.

"They want their bottle back, sir," said Donkey. "I pinched it from the restaurant."

"You what! Why in the name of God would you want to pinch an empty beer bottle?"

"For Wacker's collection . . . bottle collection, sir."

"Oh, for crying out loud."

He pulled the bottle from Donkey's belt and offered it to the White Mice with apologies. He refused to accept it.

The colonel turned to Donkey.

"He says it's a serious offence to steal glass in Vietnam — it's like gold over here. And he wants to take you off to jail! I should let him."

The colonel and the policeman argued back and forth for five minutes. As they did so, Donkey’s attention was caught, fleetingly, by a black and white flash deep in the dim depths of an adjacent store. Impossible, he thought. And yet . . . his attention was snapped back by the White Mice who wasn't going to let his prisoner go. Equally determined, the colonel wasn't going to let him take one of his men. Finally, they reached agreement. The White Mice agreed to give over his prisoner to the colonel so long as the Australian Army dealt very harshly with the prisoner for such a serious offence. The restaurant owner got his bottle back. The colonel snapped Donkey to attention, told him he was under arrest and quick-marched him back to their Land Rover, Crawley and Longhurst providing an official looking escort.

Nobody spoke until they were halfway back to the Australian base.

"Thanks, sir," said a grateful Donkey.

"You could have got yourself killed!" The colonel was not amused.

"Yes sir."

The colonel turned to Crawley. "Sergeant, how the hell did all that get started anyway? "

"Donkey volunteered to pinch a bottle for my collection sir."

"Do you have a bottle collection, sergeant?"

"Ahh, I haven't sir."

"I thought as much. You knew about bottles, glass, being worth their weight in gold, didn't you sergeant. You knew that the restaurateur would give chase, didn't you sergeant? And you set up this poor, silly bastard!"

"I didn't count on the White Mice, sir."

"You could have had him shot, you fool!"

Donkey was amazed. He'd been set up! It was all supposed to be a giggle and he'd almost been shot! He turned to Crawley who was driving.

"You fucking arsehole!"

"Shut up!" the colonel spluttered. “I ought to charge the lot of you!"

The colonel shook his head and lapsed into silence. Wisely the others followed suit until they got back to the colonel's quarters to drop him off.

"Coming over to the club for a beer later sir?" asked Crawley.

The colonel scowled. "I'm never going out with you bloody idiots again." And suddenly, surprisingly, he grinned. "I'm too old to stand that sort of excitement."

They began to laugh. All except Donkey. "It's all right for youse bastards. It wasn't your guts that was going to be blown away. What's so bloody funny

anyway?"

"You should have seen your face!" chortled Longhurst.

"You were shitting yourself!" laughed Crawley.

"Ha fucking ha!" said Donkey. "When you comedians are finished laughing at your own jokes we'll go and have a beer — and you bastards are buying — all night."

"What a good idea," chipped in the colonel. "And I'll make that an order, sergeants!"

***

As Donkey enjoyed the first of many free beers for the night, Jilly came to with a splitting headache, a blinding pain behind her eyes. She opened them, only to squeeze them shut again quickly as the light above burnt into her irises. She tried again, slower, and saw Swanker leaning over her, sponging her forehead.

She tried to speak, but couldn't. There was something jammed in, across, her mouth. She tried to move but couldn't. Her arms and legs were tied down. She was spreadeagled on her bed. She looked down and saw her breasts, bare. He had stripped her as well.

Only then did her scrambled brain snap back into focus. He knew. And he wanted revenge. *He is going to kill me. And he will torture me first. Pray God that it is quick. But it won't be.*

"Ah, there you are, awake at last," Swanker sneered down at her. "My Pearl of the Orient, my Rose of Saigon." He leered at her, a little wistful. "You really are a silly girl, you know, a silly but very beautiful Jilly."

Jilly's black eyes smouldered up at him. She didn't move.

Swanker picked up a glass of scotch and drank deeply. Jilly's eyes followed, noticing the bottle on the bedside table, a third empty. How long had she been unconscious?

"That's why we called you Jilly, wasn't it. I remember now. Because you were so damned silly, twittering all the time, fluttering like a lost butterfly. Silly Billy, it started, remember? But we could hardly call you a Billy, remember? Too damn beautiful." He took another swig. "So we changed it to Silly Jilly." He looked down into her eyes. "Silly bloody beautiful Jilly," he muttered morosely.

Jilly could see the hurt in his eyes. He really had been besotted, she suddenly realised. And that probably made him even more dangerous.

"Why did you try to kill me Jilly?" he said quietly. "I thought you loved me. Was it because you're a spy and you were told to, something you had to do?"

That's what he wanted to believe, desperately wanted to believe, and she suddenly saw an escape route.

She nodded vigorously, grunting behind the gag.

"I can't take that off or you'll scream."

She shook her head.

"You must promise me not to scream."

She nodded.

He tried to take the sticking plaster off her mouth as gently as he could but still it ripped at the fine, almost invisible, down on her ivory skin.

"Thank you," she said.

He grunted in acknowledgment, still seated on the bed beside her.

"Can you untie me please Horace, these ropes are cutting me."

"No need for that. You can talk now."

"Then could you cover me with a blanket please, very cold."

He considered that for a moment. He looked down at her beautiful body, his eyes feasting momentarily on her breasts and then her dark, downy pubic patch. All mine, he thought, whenever I want it. "No harm in that I suppose." He picked up a blanket from the floor and laid it over her.

"Thank you."

"Now answer my question."

"Horace, there are things which you must understand first," she began. "Yes, you are right. I am a spy. I am VC. But you must understand the history of this country before you say I am wrong . . ."

"Bullshit." He jumped up, agitated.

She was trying to buy time but it wasn't working. She could see that he wouldn't listen, that he would hear only what he wanted to hear. She began to cry, gently, squeezing tears from her eyes.

"All right," she sobbed quietly, "yes, you are right again. I did try to kill you, but I had no choice! I was ordered to do so. You will never know how much that hurt me, being ordered to kill my lover! Oh Horace, I love you, I do love you!" Tears streamed across her cheeks, sliding down to form wet patches on the pillow.

Swanker was taken aback. He hadn't expected this. He remained unmoved, stoic, unsure of what to do next. He wanted to believe her but . . .

"Please Horace, untie me and I'll prove it. Make love to me, please, again and again, like we used to. It can be the same again," she pleaded hungrily.

"I-I don't know . . ."

"I'll leave the VC. I can see now I was wrong, they are wrong. I can be with you forever, if that's what you want, I will do whatever you want."

Swanker was still wary, but swayed. "You'll make love to me now, after what I've done to you?"

"You have merely hit me, tied me up. I tried to kill you," she murmured softly, casting her eyes down, almost closed. "I want you, now!"

His voice caught in his throat, then ejaculated a sound, too high, that he had meant to be "okay". He tried to cough it back. "Oh Jilly, I'm so glad . . .” He began to untie her. "Can it really be the same again? Can you really love me? I love you, you know that don't you?"

She rubbed her wrists, then slowly raised herself into a sitting position, deliberately letting the blanket fall around her waist, exposing her breasts. She could see his eyes riveted to them, hungry.

"Horace darling, please rub my ankles. They hurt." He leapt to her feet, gently massaging first her left then her right ankle while Jilly slowly pulled the blanket from her body, dropping it on the floor.

"Come," she beckoned, reaching for his trouser belt. Swanker was frantic with lust, afraid he'd burst before he could even begin. He entered her quickly, felt her heat, and drove himself deeper. She gasped, wrapping her legs around him, pulling him in tighter, into her world, taking control, making him lost in love.

Swanker saw the pistol coming only because he moved his mouth from her left to her right breast. He shot out his right arm, smashing it into her wrist, sending the big 9mm Browning flying across the room.

"You bitch!" he whimpered, jumping from her, "you fucking bitch!" This time it was a scream, a scream of pain, of anguish, of betrayal.

She knew she had failed again. And this time there was no second chance. She saw his fist coming and threw her arms up to protect her face. They were of little use.

Totally enraged, out of control, he smashed her time and again, about the face, the head, the body. He punched until his hands hurt, until she was unconscious, and then attacked her soft breasts. She had screamed little, had had little time to do so as his pounding had muffled what broken sound had escaped her bloody face. Her breasts split, pouring blood on to the bed. He

began to attack her vagina, pounding, clawing, gouging, ripping.

Then he realised he was still erect, savagely erect, and he threw himself back down on to her, viciously stabbing as deeply as he could into her until he exploded, stars swimming before his eyes.

"Cop that you fucking bitch!" he panted, his chest heaving with exertion. "Cop that!" And he repeated it. "Fucking cop that!" Then he began to cry. Great racking sobs burst from him as he knelt over her body, his slackening penis covered with blood. "Oh Jilly Jilly, I didn't mean it, I didn't want to do it, you forced me to do it, you were going to kill me again . . . you were going to kill me again! You lied to me, cheated me," he cried. He rolled off the bed, collapsing with bitterness, crying, repeating, over and over, "you lied to me, you lied to me!"

It was several minutes before Swanker recomposed himself. He lifted himself on his elbows and then sat back on his haunches. He was covered in blood, her blood. He reeled back, horrified, then rushed into the shower, frantically scrubbing at himself, dousing the blood from him, muttering repeatedly, "I've killed her, I've killed her!"

He dried himself quickly and crept back into the bedroom. And he really saw, for the first time, what he had done. She was a mass of blood, twisted on the bed, smashed.

"Holy shit!" he exclaimed, panicked. He tried to think, but couldn't, the sight of her body terrifying him. He grabbed the bedclothes and pulled them over her. In blind panic he picked up the bundle and staggered out to his jeep, dumping her in the back. He drove, south, away from the town, down the beach road, through the black, moonless night.

He found a lonely beach, small, between rocky headlands and pulled up. He picked up the bundle again, not knowing what to do. He walked down the beach, into the water, waist deep, small waves pulling through and around him. A bluebottle wrapped stinging tentacles around his left arm. He cursed, dropped the bundle and brushed at his arm, turning hurriedly and wading ashore as quickly as the shorewash would allow him. He staggered up the beach to the Jeep, rubbing his arm vigorously.

***

“They think I’m fucking crazy!” Cowboy Cassidy stormed, flinging the signal message away from him as though it was leprous. “That prick! And I thought I could trust him!” He was referring to his “trusted” ally at Langley, the one who he had told exclusively about the Aussies’ Operation Santa

Claus. The one who, on having read the “eyes only” and “top secret” coded message, had laughed uproariously at this latest example of Cowboy’s crazy sense of humor and showed it to all and sundry for a jolly good laugh. “That Cowboy, ain’t he somethin!” they all guffawed until a Commie hating, red-ragger with a lot more power than they, decided it wasn’t funny at all and gave an order to “get that crazy fucker out of there!” That, they thought, was a bit rough. Every motherfucker in Vietnam was crazy, everybody knew that, and better they stay there than back here in the corridors of power. Still, orders was orders. Maybe they could transfer him someplace else, like . . .

“Australia! Nothin’s goin’ down in Australia, man. Why the fuck they wanna send me to Australia?” Hot, red liver spots were jumping out all over Cassidy’s florid face, blue capillaries popping. “You go to Australia for R&R man, it‘s a fucking rest home, a kangaroo farm. Ain’t no place for a hotshot Company man, no sir!”

Natasha cringed. This could ruin everything! The timing for her news was all wrong now. She had walked into his office just as he had been handed the signal. He had motioned her absently to a chair as he read it. Then the fireworks had begun. Still, she thought quickly, her information might be just what he needs, might give him a chance to prove he wasn’t crazy, that he was in control, killing hearts and minds as fast as he could go.

“I have seen file on Operation Santa Claus,” Natasha blurted in a momentary lull in the general’s raging, “and there are changes, another assassination.”

It didn’t register. Cassidy stared straight ahead, past her. “What do they think I am, crazy?” he repeated. “Me, crazy? I’m the only sane bastard in the whole world, that’s what I am! I’ll show those pricks!” He leapt from his chair, hands flashing to his hips. They came away packing six-guns and as his body twirled to face the huge map of the world on his office wall, so too did the weapons twirl crazily on his trigger fingers. He snapped the guns level, pointing at the map. “Orstraylia, eh,” he snarled, “I’ll give the bastards fucking Orstraylia. Cop this!” The guns roared, spitting lead, smoke and flame, the noise amplified doubly in the confines of the office. One after another the bullets splattered into the image of Australia on the map, obliterating the triangle formed by Sydney, Brisbane and Alice Springs. Melbourne copped one stray. Apart from that it was a fairly good grouping and the general viewed his marksmanship with some pride through the blued air. “Jarrn Wayne, eat your arse out!” he bellowed in triumph.

Choking on the acrid smoke, her ears ringing, Natasha, who had dived under the general's desk when she saw what he was about to do, lifted her head warily just as four MPs crashed through the door swinging their Armalites from side to side itching to add to the day's bodycount. "Hey, general," yelled their leader, "what's goin' down?"

"Will y'all look at that," he drawled, pointing to the map with a smoking six-shooter, "wipe-out. Shame we cain't do that with fuckin' Nam."

The MPs admired the general's handiwork, realised everything was "situation normal" for the Cowboy and retreated. "Guy's fucking crazy, he's ok," their leader muttered as they left.

Natasha crept up to her knees, slipping slowly and fearfully back on to the chair. He stared at her for a long time, eyes still in distant space, knowing there was something she had for him, something important, but . . .

"You've seen what, woman?" he snarled.

Natasha lowered her eyes, shifted her dainty feet. How would he react when she held back, she wondered. But really, she didn't care any more, she was sick of the games, she had almost lost sight of her original objective which was to get to America, get her family to America. Despite everything she had done for Cassidy, and despite his promises, she felt she was no closer to achieving that goal than she had been months ago. Now she was going to take control, and she had the power to do it. She had become disillusioned with the general as her saviour, at the same time as she had become enamoured of Charlie Errington. She had begun to think more and more about Australia, while not daring to dream that Errington could possibly be thinking about her as part of his future. That would be too much to hope for, the impossible dream. The American dream was more realistic, it had been promised, it was possible. But she now realised she had to make it happen, put Cassidy to the test. If he failed her then Charlie might be a good fallback. Certainly her loyalties would change, and probably gladly, she thought. If only it were possible . . .

"I have seen file on Operation Santa Claus," Natasha repeated, "the full plan, all the details."

"So, what is it woman?" Cassidy barked impatiently.

"My general, it is a plan of great daring, and gives me great fear."

It was the moment she had been dreading. At least he hasn't reloaded his revolvers, she noted. She smiled her sweetest. "General, we had a deal."

"We what?"

“You promised that if I helped you, you would get my family to . . .”

“Yes, yes, yes,” he interrupted, “not now. I want to know what’s in that file.”

“I no tell you.”

“What!”

“First we talk about deal,” she pouted, poking her chin forward, “then I tell.”

He stared at her in amazement, speechless. First Langley thinks he’s crazy and wants to send him to the arse-end of the world and now this two-bit woman is defying him. Color began rising rapidly in his cheeks and Natasha thought she had gone too far. Then he surprised her.

“What do you want?” he asked bluntly.

“My family on plane to America tomorrow, then I tell. I stay, help you more,” she offered, as a sweetener.

Cassidy stared at her, knowing she had him by the balls, and squeezing. He had to have the information she had, maybe it could save his arse. That’s all he cared about now, his Company arse.

***

The film crew returned to Saigon the next morning for a couple of days’ rest before flying north to Danang to continue filming. As soon as he walked back into the office, Donkey was greeted with "coffee corporal Simpson, good morning corporal Simpson."

"Nothing's changed here then," he lamented.

"Except that tonight, Corporal Simpson, we go on a search and deflower mission," announced Bassett.

"The round-eye round-up," sighed Donkey. "Don't you ever give up? There's no bloody round-eyes in this shit city. And any who just might be here are all officer material anyway."

"The hunt must go on!” Bassett enthused dramatically. “Where there's a will there's a way! And we will be successful tonight, Corporal Simpson, I feel it in my water."

"That's fairly close to the mark I suppose," sniffed Donkey. "The I House naturally?"

"Naturally."

"I still reckon it's easier to go out and pay for it."

"No challenge! Where's your spirit of adventure, your quest for the thrill of

the chase, the con in the conquest?"

"Yeah, I know, I know. How does it go?

'I left my heart in Melbourne town,

And my cock and balls

On the Phuoc Tuy plain'."

"What's that got to do with anything? It doesn't even rhyme."

"I know. I just made it up."

"You're weird sometimes, you know that?"

"Not half as weird as your impossible dream." And then he grinned broadly and jumped up on his desk. With an imaginary mike in his hand, he began singing:

"To dream,

The Impossible Dream."

"Not just weird, but crazy as well."

"Why don't we have a quick shower and go there for dinner as well?"

"Great idea."

"By the way, where's Jilly? I haven't seen her today."

"Dunno. Who cares. She's probably taken the day off." Bassett smirked. "I presume she's back from your little liaison in Vungers?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh come on! We all know you met her in Vungers over the weekend to slide between the silk sheets."

"What a load of crap! Where did you get that story from?"

"She told the boss some story about having to go to Vungers to look after a sick relative or something late last week. We presumed it was an excuse to meet you there while you were playing movie directors."

"Shit, you blokes are unbelievable! I was with the film team guys all the time, ask them."

Bassett backed off. "Well, she must have been fair dinkum about her relative. It seemed such a bloody weak excuse . . ."

"Yeah, for twisted bloody minds. Did she say how long she'd be away?"

"I think she told the boss for a day or two."

"Strange, she should have been back today. Ah well, anything could have happened I suppose." Donkey dismissed the conversation and yet for some reason couldn't help but feel uneasy.

The huge t-bone steaks At the I House were tender and delicious, the California red almost as good.

"No round-eyes," observed Donkey, looking around the dining room.

"Seek and ye shall find."

"I don't think He meant round-eyes when He said that."

"He who?"

"Never mind heathen. Let's go into the piano bar. And no bloody martinis tonight, either!"

They pushed through the heavily padded door into the dimness of the piano bar and almost fell over one another with shock. There, seated on stools chatting to Tom Logan were two unattached round-eyes.

"Told you I had a feeling in my water, didn't I," Bassett muttered. "You get the beers, I'll get the birds."

In the minute it took Donkey to get two Heinekens, Bassett had chatted up the two women. You had to admire the bastard, Donkey thought, he moves faster than a speeding bullet.

Introductions over, the four soon settled down to conversation while Logan played and crooned inanities at his piano. The women were nurses at a big American hospital in Saigon and hadn't been in Vietnam long. They had a flat to themselves nearby (Donkey saw Bassett's eyebrows almost leap off his forehead when he heard this). It was their first time at the I House and Donkey and Bassett were the first Australians they had met.

Somehow or other Bassett had managed to place himself on a stool between the two women. When they came into the bar, Donkey was sure the women had been sitting side by side. Amazing! he thought.

While Bassett fielded the basic, opening questions about "Orstralia", Donkey studied the targets of the mission. Both were about twenty two, blonde and spoke with that annoying American female nasal twang that sets the eardrums ringing.

There the comparisons ended. The one on Donkey's left was quite attractive, almost beautiful, facially and bodily, from what he could see. Three stools further away squatted Molly, an American apple pie of enormous proportions. Her moon face rolled away to two huge pudding breasts resting on a sumo wrestler's stomach. The stool on which she was sitting was completely enveloped and trapped between the cheeks of a monstrous backside. I wonder if that hurts? Donkey mused. A bloke would have to be awfully pissed to have a go at that.

And so the race was on. The winner would score most handsomely. The loser, in this case, also had a lot to gain . . . lards and lards of it.

While Bassett had jumped well from the barrier and took an early lead, Donkey soon had him pegged back. Betty-Anne, the lovely, was not impressed with Logan's cornpoke music and told him so.

"I much prefer classical music," she sniffed, tossing her long, blonde locks.

"As a matter of fact, so do I," said Donkey.

"Ohh, really? That's wunnerful! What's your favorite concerto?" Betty-Anne asked Donkey, turning her back on Bassett.

Quick boy, quick! Think! Donkey's mind raced. He'd just jumped a good three lengths in front with this one. He couldn't afford to let it slip. But what the hell did he know about classical music?

"Well, my collection covers quite a wide spectrum, actually. I'd have to give that some thought to come up with a favorite piece."

Lead consolidated! Bassett looked glum. Betty-Anne began talking and didn't stop. She raved about Rachmaninov, barked about Bach. Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Liszt, Berlioz and their works rolled off her gorgeous tongue. And all Donkey had to do to keep her attention focused on him was to slip in an appropriate "lovely work, that" or similar cliche.

He was lengths in front, out of sight. There wasn't a hurdle ahead and Bassett had stopped to a walk. But the longer Betty-Anne prattled on, the more worried Donkey became that he might slip in the wrong cliche. If he said 'yes' when he should say 'no' he would be in trouble. She might want a debate. She'd already shown signs of a willingness for this and he had just managed to sidestep a couple of curly queries.

". . . and the strength and power of the 1812 Overture . . ."

Hey! thought Donkey, here's one I know! Jump in here mate. Don't let this opportunity pass by.

"Yes, Tchaikovsky must have been most impressed with the defeat of Napoleon. I think it's an absolutely magnificent fucking work."

Betty-Anne's mouth suddenly slipped out of gear and dropped open. Her eyebrows shot up and eyes widened. Then the lot snapped shut.

"I don't like that sort of language," she huffed. Immediately she turned her back and began a completely different conversation with Bassett.

Oh shit! Donkey swore to himself. Me and my big four-letter-word mouth! In the home straight and I trip over the last hurdle! Bassett was grinning broadly. His radio training had taken over. He'd warned Donkey about it too. "Never drop the magic word when you're on air, old son." How could he possibly have done it! He'd blown it, there was no two ways about that! To

the victor, the cream . . . he looked over the second prize. To the loser, Molly, rolley-polley Molly. Buddha is alive and well and is a daughter of Uncle Sam.

Lardy, lardy, he thought, why me? Why is it always me! Hopefully, I'll be too “Brahms and Listz” to remember, he groaned inwardly. He tore into the Heinekens. What made it even worse was that he and Bassett were buying the drinks.

While Donkey moped, Bassett loped. He went past Go at a full gallop, collected his two hundred bucks and set off on a victory lap without even drawing breath. In like bloody Flynn. Donkey listened miserably as Bassett poured out his treacly palaver. She lapped it up like a starving cat with a bowl of cream.

The time dragged. The drinks bill had all but exhausted what had been a healthy wallet in Donkey's hip pocket. And Bassett and Betty-Anne chatted on and on. Molly's conversation was limited to a word here and there, and only when invited to contribute by her more illustrious companion.

Why is it, Donkey wondered, that lovely sheilas always drag around a dragon with them? Why can't the lovely birds team up together and all the ugly ones stay home or something? Why is it always one doll, one dog?

Donkey kept glancing at his watch. He saw the deadline — the time they would have to leave to get back to their hotels before curfew — come and go. He leaned into his beer and waited for the Bassett coup de grace.

"Oh Lord! Look at the time!" exclaimed Molly. "We'd better go Betty-Anne or we'll get caught in the curfew!"

Here it comes, thought Donkey. Mr Flynn, you're on!

Bassett came in on cue. "It's a quarter to ten! Crikey, Donkey, we're in a bit of trouble mate." The con was on, the first line delivered. Now, let's just hope they invite us back to their place for the night, mused Donkey, or we're really in the shit!

"What do you mean, Darrnn?" purred Betty-Anne. How sickening, thought Donkey, she even calls him by his Christian name!

"We live over the other side of town, in Cholon. We haven't got a hope of getting back before curfew now. I was so engrossed in your fascinating story I didn't notice the time fly by."

"No problem!" volunteered Betty-Anne, "you can stay at our place for the night if you like. We're just around the corner."

"Gee, could we really? Believe me, we'd be shot if we tried to go back

now. Your offer would really save our skins. Thanks a lot, Betty-Anne."

Betty-Anne was quite pleased with her stroke of genius in issuing her invitation. Molly wasn't at all sure it was such a good idea to invite virtual strangers into their apartment. And she said so, in a loud whisper, but loud enough so that Bassett and Donkey could hear quite well.

"Oh, there's no need to worry about us," said Bassett. "No sir! We're as straight as a die, no trouble at all."

"It'll be all right Molly," Betty-Anne reassured her friend, "they're good guys."

Hullo, thought Donkey, I've been half-forgiven. Not that that's much good to me now.

"Come on then, quickly!" said Bassett, grabbing Betty-Anne by the hand and pulling her gently towards the door, "we'll still get a cab if we're lucky."

"No, no! We've got our bikes."

"Bikes?"

"Yes, motorbikes. When in Rome . . ."

"I hope you two ladies don't mind giving two gentlemen a lift then?"

"Nooo! Come on, it will be fun!"

Donkey couldn't believe it. Betty-Anne had a smart, sporty 125cc Honda. Molly had an Italian scooter that had to be push started and went put-put-put.

Betty-Anne and Bassett sped away trailing blue smoke.

"I'll jump on and you push," puffed Molly.

Donkey pushed. The bike wouldn't move.

"Take the brake off," huffed Donkey.

"I haven't got it on," wheezed Molly.

God, she's got asthma as well! Donkey put his head down and pushed the scooter with all his strength. Slowly it started to move. After about twenty feet it spluttered into life, spitting blued smoke and petrol fumes into Donkey's lungs, the last thing he needed on top of a belly full of beer. He straightened slowly and put his hands on his aching back. Molly was put-put-putting away, her vast and massive posterior swallowing the ample saddle. The back tyre was almost flat.

"Come on!" she yelled over her shoulder. Donkey gave chase in a staggering, drunken gallop and leapt aboard. He grabbed hold of Molly for dear life as she accelerated away. Staring into her broad back he felt like a chihuahua perched up behind Farmer Brown.

Betty-Anne and Bassett must have thought so too because when Donkey

and Molly caught up to them they almost fell off their speedy machine, they laughed so much. Just as well I'm pissed, thought Donkey, or I'd be terribly embarrassed.

The flat had a kitchen, bathroom and one bedroom which had an archway the size of double doors between it and the lounge. Betty-Anne's bed was in the lounge which was quite large, the two steps down to Molly's smaller room giving it something of a regal appearance.

Molly produced a bottle of Johnnie Walker black label and poured drinks all round. Sorry, she said, but there was no beer.

Bassett didn’t care. Within minutes he and Betty-Anne were all over one another like a pair of puppies and Molly was yawning cavernously. Donkey picked up his second glass of scotch and sat back morosely. So did Molly. Neither of them knew quite where to look. One can be amused by puppies rolling around, pawing one another, Donkey mused, but the antics of Bassett and Betty-Anne were something else altogether.

With Betty-Anne's head buried somewhere in his neck, Bassett turned pleading, doleful eyes on Donkey and mouthed something. Donkey guessed it might have been "bugger off!" but wasn't quite sure. When Bassett repeated the order Donkey was quite sure. But how? he wondered, he didn’t have a bed.

It was another five minutes before Molly finally saw the light. By that time, Bassett was frantic.

"I'm going to bed," Molly declared.

Bassett sighed expansively.

"What's wrong, honey?" mumbled Betty-Anne.

"Nothing, nothing. The others are just going to bed."

"Ummmmmmmmmm. What a great idea."

"Come on Donkey, I'll make a bed for you on the floor," said Molly. "It will have to be in my room. There's nowhere else."

Molly threw a couple of blankets on the floor for Donkey and while she went to the bathroom, he stripped and collapsed on to them gratefully. She re-appeared in a nightie the size of a two-man tent and rolled on to her protesting bed.

Donkey tried to sleep but despite his bellyfull of beer it was impossible. The noises of sex coming from Betty-Anne's bed were loud, varied and extremely disturbing. Dirty bastard, Donkey thought. The "oohs", "aahs" and other sounds of love making were driving him to distraction. Lucky bastard!

"Hey Fred!"

"Uuuummmm?"

Sounds like a ferret down a rabbit hole, sighed Donkey. “Do you have to make such a song and dance about it?"

"Shuddup!"

"I don't suppose you'd like a bit of Tchaikovsky on the stereo, would you? The Nutcracker Suite seems particularly appropriate."

Donkey heard Molly giggle sharply before muffling it with her bedsheet.

"Shuddup!" snapped Bassett.

"Romeo and Juliet?"

Molly giggled again, louder.

"Fer Christ's sake, Donkey . . ."

"Right. Shuddup."

"Right."

Donkey lay back miserably on the hard floor as Romeo and Juliet plucked at one another's strings, making their own music, composing their own concerto. He looked up at the mountainous growth in the bed beside him . . . and wondered. I am drunk, he said to himself, awfully pissed . . .

"Hey, Molly."

"Umm."

"It's a bit hard to sleep with all that racket going on, eh."

"It'll be over soon."

"Not if I know Fred. Concertos are not for him. He goes for a full-length opera."

"My God!" she exclaimed. Then, after a moment's silence, she began giggling again.

"Hey Molly, how about we put something racy on the stereo, like the 1812 Overture, to make 'em hurry up a bit."

Molly thought that was funny. She hooted with laughter, stuffing the sheet into her mouth again.

Donkey saw his opening. "You know, this floor is awfully hard, Molly."

Molly didn't answer for a full ten seconds. Romeo and Juliet appeared to be into their Second Act, working in perfect harmony. Their audience was hanging on to every excruciating word, sound, sigh, grunt, building their own pictures from the actors' lines emanating from the blackened stage.

"All right," sniffed Molly eventually, "you can share my bed — but you must sleep on top of the sheet."

It's a start, thought Donkey. He moved on to the bed. He felt like Jack of Beanstalk fame sleeping with the giant. And he decided that perhaps he wasn't pissed enough after all. If he climbed on to that, he mused, and fell off, he could do himself a nasty injury.

His thoughts of sleep however were crushed when Molly rolled over towards him. Judging by the sounds from the other bed the nutcracker had a sweet grip.

"I can't stand it!" gasped Molly, grasping Donkey in an elephantine grip, seeking his mouth with hers. After a full minute Donkey escaped just in time to avoid the last rites but his body was still firmly pinioned.

What the hell, he thought. Why not? Not that he had much choice really. She pulled him on top of her and wriggled and squirmed. And then she said IT! She really said IT!

"Are you in?"

Donkey was absolutely mortified, shattered. The truth was, he didn't know! There were so many rolls to negotiate he didn't really know!

She bounced him around the bed like a rubber ball on a trampoline as she led the Charge of the Lard Brigade.

When he awoke the next morning, with a giant hangover, he looked around in astonishment. Where am I? he asked himself. And slowly it all came back . . . Betty-Anne and Fred. Yep, asleep in bed in the other room. Rolley polley Molly Mountain reposing beside him. The horrible truth . . .

"Oh my God!" he squeaked, jumping out of bed and dressing quickly, "I've got to get out of here."

Molly began stirring. As Donkey was pulling on his shoes, suddenly she farted, loud and long. He leapt to his feet and ran for the door. "Incoming!" he shouted and fled.

Back safely in his own room at the Canberra and under the shower, he wondered how he seemed to get himself into these messes. It was bloody Fred's fault. God! Fancy having it off with that! He knew he'd never be allowed to live it down. And what if Jilly found out! "Ah, what the fuck, who cares," he muttered to himself. He really wasn't in the mood for feeling guilty. And why should he, for Christ's sake. She was only a convenient fuck, wasn't she?

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Jilly didn't turn up for work on Tuesday morning either and Donkey

wondered openly whether there was something wrong. The colonel said he'd ask the MPs to check her house. Donkey would have done it himself but the film crew's flight to Danang left Tan Son Nhut at 1100 hours.

Errington was in the office when the matter was discussed. He, too, was curious about the mysterious sick relative in Vung Tau. When the MPs reported back that there was no-one at Jilly's Saigon flat, he asked the Tortoise if he could leave it with him.

"It could involve a security matter, sir," he said.

The Tortoise was more than happy to be rid of the problem. He had enough to worry about.

Errington reported to the general. "I don't know what it means, sir, but I don't like the smell of it."

"Why's that corporal?"

"How will this affect Operation Santa Claus sir?"

"Yes corporal, let's review that. The original intention of the operation was to get rid of this woman Jilly who we believe is a spy. That became complicated a little when General Dong, in our suspicion anyway, covered for her by shooting that poor fellow down in the yard. Now she's been missing for a few days. I don't know how much store we should place in that, corporal, do you?"

"No sir, it's just rather odd. She seemed to rush off at rather short notice."

"To keep an eye on Simpson?"

"That's what the PR guys thought but Simpson told them he didn't meet or see her there."

"Hmm." Big Al reflected for a minute, chin cupped in his right hand. "Maybe Dong sent her down there just to keep a covert eye on him." Suddenly he dropped his hand, jutted his chin, decision made. "You know corporal, I don't give a damn where the woman has gone, she's out of my hair and that's where I want her to stay. If she doesn't come back, that's fine with me, our operation ceases. Except I'll be damn careful what I say to Dong. And I may have a word with General Cassidy."

"Righto sir. I don't think we can find her so let's hand the problem over to Dong. She's his girl."

Dong was very concerned, and said so. He would find her, he assured Errington. He would begin his search in Vung Tau.

***

The film crew flew some three hundred miles north to Danang and the headquarters of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, which consisted of about fifty of the toughest old warriors in the Army, all experienced warrant officers and officers. Each was attached to a different unit of the South Vietnamese Army as advisers. Most had gained jungle experience during the Malaya Emergency and many had fought in Korea as well. Among their revolving numbers were some of Australia's most decorated soldiers.

For many, one twelve-month tour of duty was never enough; if they couldn't extend that period while in-country they'd go home and immediately volunteer for another tour ASAP. Their leadership was brilliant, their courage and daring unquenchable. They would melt into the bush with their units for two weeks and re-appear, if they could, a fortnight later back in Danang just to pick up their pay.

The film unit timed its trip to Danang to coincide with this " pay day" visit by the training team. They flew courtesy of the US Air Force in a Hercules C-140 transport which thundered and roared throughout the three-hour flight. Ears ringing, they were glad to get off the damn thing.

They were met at the airport and driven to “Australia House”, a villa used by the training team as their base. The bar was already full when the crew arrived and they swung into action immediately. The advisors would be going bush again the next morning and the only time available to the crew was that afternoon.

But the camera wouldn't work. A fault in the power pack meant they were finished before shooting a foot of film.

The advisors were disappointed. Most had families back in Australia they hadn't seen in a long time and, conversely, hadn't seen them. That 30-second Christmas "hello" would have been something to close that communication gap just a little.

Leaving the camera at the US Marines press centre for repair, the film crew joined the team that evening for its fortnightly Aussie barbecue. Donkey found the men fascinating, amazing. Some of the tales of derring-do were hair-raising, others full of compassion. There seemed to be a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde in all of them. For some, the love of war, or ultimate danger and risk proved stronger than love of family; divorce was no stranger to this group of men. Que sera, sera. *A man gotta do what a man gotta do.* They soldiered on, regardless.

The next morning the team’s CO invited the crew to go water skiing on Danang Harbor — after he had cleaned up a little messy business first. There had been a death in the house overnight.

"What happened?" asked Crawley, aghast.

"One of the advisors killed a houseboy this morning. Most unfortunate really. He was sweeping around the bed of one of my men while he was still asleep — he really shouldn't have been in the room that early. Anyway the broom bumped our bloke's bed, disturbing him. Before he or the boy knew what had happened, the boy was on the floor dead."

"Holy shit!"

"You must remember that these blokes live on a knife's edge; they're out in the bush for a fortnight at a time and they're never sure who they can trust and who they can't. They sleep with one eye open. And if you touch one of them you're a dead man in an instant. Our bloke thought he was still out in the bush and did only what comes naturally to him. Most unfortunate, the whole thing."

"Particularly for the boy."

"Well, when I say 'boy' . . . he was a houseboy, not a kid. You know, our bloke wasn't all that happy about the incident either."

"Sort of *sorry ‘bout dat*?"

"It has to be that way, doesn't it. There is a war on," the captain sniffed.

"But how did he kill him?"

"These blokes are experts at hand-to-hand combat, you know."

"Yes, I suppose they would be," murmured an awed Crawley.

Danang Harbor was beautiful. As they skimmed across crystal clear blue waters in the powerful ski boat, Wacker couldn't help comparing it with Sydney Harbor.

"Look at that, cliffs, coves, little sandy beaches, the only thing different is the jungle coming down to the water's edge instead of bush or the gardens of the filthy rich."

They pulled into a cove out near the harbor's heads, dived off rocks, swam in the warm, clear water and marvelled at the beauty of the jungle creeping down a steep hill towards their sandy cove. It was just before midday when the captain called them back to the boat. They had to go.

"Why so early?" asked Donkey. "I could stay here all day. The camera won’t be ready until later this arvo."

"If we don't leave before midday we're all liable to finish up with a bullet

in the back."

"What?"

"It's our beach in the morning and Charlie's beach in the afternoon. He's probably up there in the jungle now waiting for us to go so he can have a swim."

"You've got to be joking!" Donkey looked up into the lush jungle. He just couldn't believe it. War, surely, could never disturb this little piece of paradise.

"You want to hang around to find out?"

They left. The VC beach at Vung Tau seemed strange enough, but this! Was this another slice of madness in a mad, mad, world or a small sliver of sanity? Donkey shook his head in bewilderment as they retreated across the harbor.

As they did so, another boat sped past, about two hundred metres away, a skier in tow.

“Have a look at that crazy bugger on the ski,” the colonel said, “is that a black and white scarf he’s wearing?”

Donkey nodded, dumbfounded, as Jansen waved heartily. He said nothing.

The film crew returned to Saigon the next morning and Colonel West and Wacker Crawley flew out to Canberra two days later. All in all the crew had taped Christmas messages from more than 300 Diggers, all saying, in one form or another, the sentiments so simply, so beautifully expressed by the big fella out in the bush from Nui Dat: "I miss you all . . . I love you all . . . Merry Christmas."

Some of those blokes, Donkey knew, wouldn't see Christmas. They would become statistics, KIA. There were stringent safeguards, of course, to ensure that dead men told no tales, especially "Merry Christmas mum and dad!"

Their little bit of film would be KIA'd also, removed from the final edit even at the last minute if necessary, unless there was a major fuck-up in Canberra. Of course, that had been known to happen in the Army too, the odd fuck-up.

But even if that didn't happen, Donkey wondered, what would be the reaction back home?

Three hundred Diggers . . . three hundred families; more, if you counted the married blokes with their own wives and kids as well as mums and dads, brothers and sisters; and girlfriends, fiancees and their families. Thousands probably, bloody thousands . . .

Thousands of tears of grief, anguish, loneliness, heartache, pain, fear. Even, maybe, bewilderment. Why? Oh God . . . why?

And mixed in with all that, a million tears of pride.

Christ, thought Donkey, what a way to spend Christmas Day.

***

When Natasha waved her family goodbye she was distraught, as indeed they were too. Would she ever see them again? Would she ever escape from Vietnam? Or was she locked in a whirlpool from which she had just managed to throw her family before they became sucked down like so many millions of others? But as the plane bearing her mother, brothers and sisters, including Little Flower, soared into the shimmering heat to begin its journey from Saigon to Los Angeles, from the City of Sin to the City of Angels, she sat down momentarily to compose herself, trying to stifle her sobbing.

Donkey and the film crew gratefully jumped down from the rear loading bay of the Hercules and, ears still ringing shrilly from the engine noise, gratefully lugged their gear into the airport terminal.

Their eyes met at exactly the same moment, and both were startled. It's Little Flower! he thought joyfully.

Simpson! Her heart leapt into her mouth. No, not now! He mustn't recognise me! In the weeks she had been working at the Free World Building she had managed to avoid him. She had prepared a story for the occasion when their paths would inevitably cross, if he showed signs of recognition. She had known at the time that using her identical twin sister to seduce Simpson was a risk that could rebound on her but she had counted on the dimness of the bar to cloud her sister's looks, and the uniform she wore around the Free World Building to confuse any thought of recognition Simpson might entertain. After all, bar girls don't wear soldier's uniforms. But now she was without composure, disoriented, it wouldn't work! She couldn't face him, turned away quickly, just as he called.

"Hey, Little Flower! It's me, Donkey." As she turned from him, he suddenly realised she was in uniform. He couldn't have made a mistake, could he? No, no way! He'd recognise that sheila anywhere, any time. You don't forget in a hurry the sheila who took your cherry, no way! But why was she in uniform? Why had she turned away, spurned him even? There was no doubt in his mind she had recognised him. She'd looked at him with a shock of recognition, he was sure of that. He hurried after her as she headed quickly

for the exit door, determined not to let her go, although he didn't quite know why. He was just intrigued as to why she would pretend not to know him. Then again, she is a whore! She probably has jigajig with a hundred blokes a week, so what makes you think you were so special that she's going to remember you? *Because I was a virgin!*

And there *was* something different about her, he remembered now. She had rejected all his offers of Saigon teas. She had been reserved, standoffish, almost hiding behind the protection of the bar. No, she was no ordinary bargirl. Perhaps that's what intrigued him. He caught her as she reached for the door, putting a hand gently on her shoulder. "Little Flower?" he asked hesitantly. She turned, smiling brilliantly, the smile which had so captivated both he and Errington.

"Yes sir?" she asked, without any sign of recognition.

He stammered. "Don't you remember me? We, ah . . ." His voice trailed off as he began to think ahead of himself, staring at her uniform, her captain's bars. I can hardly jog her memory by saying she deflowered me, can I! Shit, how do I put this? He began to feel ridiculous, embarrassed, to doubt himself . . . and yet it *was* her! It *had* to be her! She looked up at him intently, her eyes, still a little red and puffy from the crying, moistly golden brown, still captivating, disarming. She could see she had won the high ground.

"Ah yes, I am sorry," she apologised. "I have seen you around the Free World building, I think," she purred, "but have we met?"

"No, not there," Donkey replied. "Don't you remember?"

"At one of General Dong's parties, perhaps?" Teasing him.

"No, I . . ."

"No? Never mind! We meet now." She thrust her right hand towards him, long nails bright red, delicate fingers long and fine. "I am Tran Thi Dai, General Dong's Aide. I work in the general's ground floor office at Free World, for just a few weeks. Corporal Errington — Charlie — he friend. He call me Natasha."

"Charlie! Really?"

"He friend you too?"

"Yes, he is." Donkey swallowed. "Look, I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I really thought you were someone else, someone I met some time ago. You look so like her, it's amazing." He laughed, trying to cover his embarrassment. "You haven't got a twin sister, have you?"

The corner of her mouth twitched. She recovered quickly, smiled

mischievously. “Ah, but don’t all Asians look same-same to you westerners?” Her voice tinkled.

He grinned, shamefaced. “I’m sorry, I thought I’d been here longer than that. That’s just a first impression. I know better now.”

“Then you make mistake.”

“Yes, I suppose I must have.”

Natasha put out her hand again. “Nice meeting you. I must go now. I see you at Free World, no? You visit me, with Charlie. Okay?”

“Yes, we’ll do that. Bye.”

He watched her walk away, puzzled, confused. How could he be so wrong? She opened the back door of a large black limo and as it pulled quickly from its parking space he noticed the general’s stars on the plate on the front bumper, the darkly tinted windows obscuring the occupants.

Donkey watched as the car sped past in front of him but he managed to glimpse the other occupant in the back seat. To his amazement, unless his brain was playing tricks on him again, it was General Cowboy Cassidy! Now what was General Dong’s Aide doing with the Cowboy? He snorted. Nothing made any sense in this country. Fair dinkum, he thought, if that sheila wasn’t Little Flower I’ll bare my bum in Tu Do Street. What the hell was going on? He’d check her out with Errington.

“What took you?” Cassidy snapped.

Natasha pulled a tissue from her purse and began sniffling. “My family,” she sniffed. “I will miss them.”

“You’ll miss ‘em permanently unless you tell me what’s in that file,” he snarled.

She told him all about Operation Santa Claus. She didn’t mention her meeting with Simpson. In her distress, she forgot to mention Jilly.

“Both of them!” he exclaimed. “Uncle Ho and Ky as well! And they think I’m crazy. This is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard! It won’t work. How are they going to make it work? How’s this superman Simpson going to do it?” He turned back to Natasha. “Are you absolutely sure you’ve got this right, is there something else, something you may have missed?”

“No, my general. That is it, word for word as close as I can remember.”

“Why in hell’s name wasn’t I told? Aren’t I running this goddamn country?” Cassidy fumed. It was obvious to him now that Langley was behind the operation, at a very high level, perhaps only the Director and one or two others. Maybe not even the President. Certainly not Westmoreland.

He could see there were more holes in the plan than a bad guy in a black sombrero dumb enough to pull a gun on John Wayne. It was beyond belief. There had to be more to it, more subtlety, more cunning, more connivance. For example, once Ky was killed, who would replace him? Dong? As far as he had been able to ascertain Dong already had his own disposal plans for Mr Ky but wasn't ready just yet, didn't have the support.

Or did he? From Langley? Was Dong aware of, part of, this plan? Was he indeed ready to move? What would he do? When? More to the point, what would he, Cowboy Cassidy, the Managing Director of the Company's Vietnam operations, do? It appeared the Board of Directors had changed the Company's foreign strategic direction and neglected to tell the Chief Executive who didn't like that one little bit.

"Well fuck 'em!" he swore. "This prick's gonna have an accident. He ain't the right guy, Cowboy Cassidy says so. Hell, how do those shiny-arsed bastards back in The World know who this guy is? For all they know he could be workin' for Uncle Ho." He laughed. "Now wouldn't that be something? The guy Langley wants to run the southern armies is one of Uncle Ho's men. Ha! Fucking idiots!" he spat.

When Natasha spoke again he was startled. He'd forgotten she was still there in the car with him. "What?" he snapped.

"There is one other thing, general. General Dong's spy, Jilly, who works for the Australians, has disappeared." She told about Jilly's mystery trip to Vung Tau, where it was thought she was to meet Simpson but didn't, and hadn't returned. Dong, she said, was looking for her. All very strange, she said, very strange.

"That's not the only bloody strange thing going on in this country, sweetheart. And Cowboy Cassidy ain't gonna be pushed out of the action. It's time I saw what Big Al's got to say about all this bullshit, this Operation Santy-fuckin'-Claws."

Natasha paled. That, she knew, would put her in grave danger. She had to get to Charlie fast.

CHAPTER 22

Ho Long Quan was a peasant farmer who lived in a small village fifteen kilometres south of Vung Tau. Every morning, at sunrise, before he tended his animals, he would walk down to the waterline on the beach, like everyone in his village would do, every day, and void his bowels. If it was an outgoing tide, good. If not, well, eventually the tide would turn. This particular morning his routine was ruined. The body on the beach caught his attention immediately. He rushed back to his village, just over the sand dunes, and warned his family and neighbours: "VC, VC!"

"Where?" his stern, domineering wife demanded.

"On the beach! A body!"

His wife had heard nothing during the night. She had to see for herself. She approached the body carefully, knowing it could be booby-trapped. It was laying face down, but she could see it was a woman, a young woman. She bent down and carefully rolled the body over. It was black and blue and sand choked cuts and abrasions, her mouth and eyes.

Suddenly the body convulsed and coughed. Ho’s wife threw herself backwards in terror, frightening the devil out of the crowd which had gathered behind her. The front row shot backwards, falling over those behind.

"She's still alive!" Ho exclaimed in amazement.

The villagers took her into their care, bathing her wounds, dressing them and tending her fever. She was still unconscious and they didn't know what else to do.

Two days later the fever was raging when a small VC cadre called into the village for food. As a propaganda ploy, to show that they really cared about their people, they volunteered to take the mystery woman to the hospital in Vung Tau, a trip the villagers made only infrequently to go to the market.

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When Donkey returned from Danang there was still no sign of Jilly. "There's nothing we can do," Errington told him, "we've got General Dong's dogs on the job and that's the best we can hope for. Thousands of people go missing in this country every week, it's like looking for a needle in a haystack, especially if she doesn't want to be found."

"That doesn't make sense. What reason would she have to disappear?"

"Who knows?"

"Something must have happened to her."

"We're trying, I've tried to tell you that a hundred times."

Back in the office, Bassett broke some news. "I'm off to Nui Dat and Vung Tau next week," he told Donkey, "so you, Corporal Simpson, have exactly one week to learn how to become a radio newsreader."

"What?" said Donkey, "me read the news? Why are you going to the Dat anyway?"

"To record Christmas messages for radio stations back home, the same as you blokes did for TV."

Donkey held an imaginary microphone in his right hand in front of his face and put his left hand over his left ear. "Off into the boonies to fight the war with a tape recorder. Da-da!"

"Something like that. Meanwhile I face the almost impossible task of turning that country nasal twang into something our boys out in those boonies can understand."

Donkey found it a tedious and tiring business. He had to learn to speak from the depths of his stomach and through his mouth, not his nose; he had to learn inflection; voice modulation; not to speak too fast. At the end of the first day's training Bassett was close to tearing his hair out.

"How'd I go?" asked Donkey hopefully as they packed up to go home.

"Bloody hopeless," was the sharp answer he got.

Donkey practised day and night. Back at the Canberra he would borrow a tape recorder and read some news items he had written to practice with. The first time he did that he knew what Bassett had meant. When he played it back he sounded bloody hopeless.

But he kept at it. Apart from being fun, he thought it just might add a string to his bow when he returned home and applied for a job. It was a tremendous challenge and he'd always loved challenges. He almost drove Ned mad of a night as he practiced for hours on end but Ned eventually decided that if he couldn't beat Donkey he'd join him and they began to make fun tapes. The more cans they emptied the funnier the tapes seemed to become. Night after night they collapsed into bed pissed and pissing themselves laughing at their own comic news reading talents. But the last thought Donkey had every night was still Jilly. Where was she?

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“Heavens above,” Big Al asked, shocked, “how did you find out about that?”

“Never mind,” Cassidy replied belligerently, “I want to know what it’s all about.”

The Australian sighed and then laughed a little. Yes, perhaps it did have a humorous side. He turned to Cassidy.

“General, do you remember when you came into my office and accused one of my men, my own secretary in fact, of spying?”

Cassidy nodded.

“Well, Operation Santa Claus was designed to get to the bottom of that. Sit down, general, I’ll get you a coffee and we’ll go over this whole business. I was going to give you a call as a matter of fact, because we believe we have unearthed some information — certainly strong suspicions — that you will be interested in. There are some people you and I work with who may not be what they seem.”

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As the two generals talked, Charlie Errington was wringing his hands in dismay and despair. He was sitting on Natasha’s bed, she lying on it, sobbing quietly.

“How could you have done this to me,” he croaked. And quickly realised he was wrong. “No, no, I didn’t mean that, I shouldn’t have said that, I must try to understand.”

Natasha had begun at the beginning, way back in Hanoi. She had told him about her father’s death, fleeing with her mother, brothers and sisters, the vicious struggle just to eat in Saigon;the bars, the days with the circle of the generals, good and bad, her rescue by Dong, her deal with Cassidy, how she had read the Operation Santa Claus file on his desk and then told Cassidy about it. Everything done with just one aim — to stay alive. She hadn’t meant to hurt him, indeed loved him, as much as she dared, because she was a toy in the hands of the powerful and always had been.

As he looked at her, curled vulnerably on the bed, her face buried in the pillow, Errington was hit by an awful truth. It’s just been a game to me, he realised. For Natasha, it’s really been life or death. He was swept by a feeling of shame on one hand and compassion on the other and reached down to her, gently turning her shoulder so that she was forced to look at him, blurred,

through swollen, tear-filled eyes.

He spoke gently. “Natasha, I have told you before I love you and I still do. And if I get sent back to Australia then I will fight to have you sent with me. But first, I must speak to my general.”

Errington was surprised, to say the least, by Big Al’s reaction to his news. He’d just smiled broadly.

“We all make mistakes, corporal. You, for instance, won’t leave Top Secret files laying around again. In fact we’ve all made a few in this particular instance. But by some peculiar stroke of luck, Operation Santa Claus might just catch a marlin instead of a minnow.”

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By the end of the week Bassett declared Donkey ready, in a rough sort of way, to go on air.

Boarding the bus at the Canberra on Monday morning, Donkey was highly excited about reading the news at 1000 hours. As soon as he got to work he would have to sort through the signals sent from Army PR in Canberra specifically for their news service and then listen to Radio Australia at nine o'clock to get the real news. The “news” in the Canberra signals was always twenty four hours late and stale. Radio Australia was right up to date — and that's what the Saigon PR Unit felt the Diggers deserved — news up to the minute.

The news was important to Bassett. Colonel Pace, shortly after his arrival in Vietnam, had doubted its value and had argued that it should be dropped; his staff had enough to do anyway. He argued that there were enough shortwave radios among Australian troops in Saigon, Nui Dat and Vung Tau for them to tune into Radio Australia themselves if they wanted news from home.

Bassett pointed out that although this might be so, the PR Unit had had to install an aerial right to the top of the five-storey Free World building to get a very scratchy reception only; Nui Dat's rubber trees certainly weren't that tall.

There was also the point that the troops at Nui Dat spent a lot of time either out in the bush or away from their tents where such large radios were kept — not everyone worked in an office. However troops did have small transistors in their work places and the radio news service from Saigon reached everyone.

And the troops loved it. Time and again they had told members of the PR units in either Saigon or Nui Dat that it kept them in touch with home, not

just in the information sense, but in a much deeper, heartfelt way. A lousy five minutes in every twenty-four hours each weekday kept them happy. For the other twenty three hours fifty five minutes they were deluged with American Top 40 and what color underdaks the beloved President was wearing that morning and what unit where had the biggest bodycount of the day and how many bags of captured VC rice had been bayoneted in the villages — while villagers with distended stomachs watched in utter amazement and tried to understand that there was a war on, yeah, and their hearts and minds were being won (better a fill of philosophy than food) and they were being saved from the devil. *Hell-ay-loo-yah brother!*

Bassett also loved the news service because it gave him the opportunity to work close to the news of the day as opposed to the propagandist role he was expected to fulfil as an Army PR reporter. News was news, it couldn't brook interference.

Donkey found that the staff running the American Forces Network in Saigon, both AM and FM, had exactly the same attitude. When it came to news they had a fair degree of freedom, and used it. Despite the huge amounts of propaganda that spewed from radio sets throughout Vietnam, their news broadcasts were as independent as they could make them. They were pros and "real proud" of it. They reported the anti-Vietnam, anti-Nixon revolution back in “The World”, unwittingly doing their little bit for Hanoi in the name of Truth, Justice and The American Way.

Bassett and Donkey found the AFN people highly intelligent and widely read. Only one, a technician, had ever bought kangaroo feathers. He had been laughed out of the studio when he had displayed them proudly. He had taken the con in good spirit, after he got his money back from Ned, and now the feathers were a proud, labelled display in a studio showcase alongside posters warning about the dangers of loose tongues and VD. The caption read: "DANGER: Beware Aussies bearing kangaroo feathers. They are a wealth hazard."

The propaganda value of the station was well recognised by the VC. It drove them to distraction, so much so that the Saigon building was a prime rocket target. It had been hit several times over the years, the last during the May offensive early one morning.

The DJ on air at the time was Dave Collert, a tall, unflappable guy from Denver, Colorado. When the rocket hit the building Collert was encouraging sleepy heads to get out of bed for the day's work. Without breaking stride

after almost being blown out of his studio chair, he said: "Wow, here we go again! The show that begins with a bang! The Dawnbuster!" That was heard all over Vietnam and everybody knew what the bang had been. Collert was decorated for his "coolness under fire".

Everything went like clockwork until he sat down at the news desk and waited for his cue. His knees began to shake, then his legs. His whole body began shivering with fright — and then he was on.

He remembered everything Bassett had taught him and found Bassett had forgotten one very important point — how to speak correctly with violently quivering lips. He was immensely relieved when it was over. The technician in the adjoining booth gave him a thumbs up which cheered him no end as he slumped back in his seat from the microphone.

Back at the Free World he was complimented on a good job. While his mates weren't exactly effusive, they were encouraging. By the end of the day he was ready to play. He phoned Errington. “Any news on Jilly?”

“No mate, not a thing. It’s very strange but we may be over-reacting. You know what communications are like in this country. I suppose all we can do is stay patient. Something will turn up eventually.”

Donkey couldn’t help worrying and was very morose when he returned to the Canberra that evening. Ned tried to cheer him up. There was a new knockshop he'd heard about, he said, where the girls were kept under the watchful eye of the Australian doctors. In fact, Ned had got his information from a doctor when he had gone to see him about the dose of gonorrhoea that he had been given by Fabulous Fanny. The doctor had told him that if he had to tomcat around the city, he should visit this particular establishment because Army medicos kept the girls clean.

Ned was most upset that his Fabulous Fanny had given him the clap. And he had told her so in no uncertain terms. When he began calling her "pox-box" and she retaliated by furiously boxing his ears, the bar owner had thrown him out. There was no going back there for awhile.

Donkey was in two minds. While he was on a high after the success of his news, he still had Jilly heavily on his mind. There were two things he just couldn't fathom: why she had disappeared and what he felt about her. He knew she was the only one who could answer the first question but thought he should know his own feelings. He didn't.

He had compared Jilly with Allison, over and over. Allison was still his fiancee, he still loved her. But she was thousands of miles away, in another

world (did it still exist? Was that world real or this one?) while Jilly was here, now. Or had been. He just didn't know. Another question without answer. He decided to go with Ned. It wouldn't do any harm.

The doctor's clean bar was a huge place. The ground floor even had a dance floor and there were many couples using it when Donkey and Ned walked in. The juke box music was too loud so they went up a flight of wide stairs to a smaller, more intimate bar. There were Septics everywhere, girls everywhere, but they all seemed taken.

"That's good," said Donkey, "we can have a peaceful beer and save a bloody fortune not buying teas."

Ned had it all worked out too. "All we have to do is wait until the girls strip the Yanks' pockets or until they fall down dead drunk and then we're in like Flynn."

They sat, talked and drank. They admired the scenery, the dancing, the mauling, the groping of the GIs, the deftness and dexterity of the girls as they stripped wallet after wallet, all using the same lines: "I no boom-boom girl. No like. Work here to help fambly. " There were tears that would chisel away at wooden hearts and open reluctant wallets.

"I wonder how many of them are fair dinkum?" Donkey pondered.

"Fair dinkum what?"

"Good Samaritans."

"Good Samaritans? This lot? You've got to be joking! What do you mean?"

"You know, the stories they tell you about dad being killed in the war, two brothers away fighting, no food for the family, sick mum, six brothers and sisters to feed, all that stuff."

"You know better than to believe that bullshit."

"Yeah, I know, but it's more than likely that some of them are telling the truth. There have been the odd million or twelve killed over here in the past decade or so."

"But there must be hundreds of thousands of bar girls in Saigon alone! Don't tell me every one of them is, as you so generously termed it, a Good Samaritan!"

"No, I didn't say that. I said *some* of them could be genuine."

Donkey noticed that a girl he had seen in tears only two minutes before was now smiling broadly. So was the GI with whom she was seated. He was immensely pleased. She had her left hand inside his fly.

Ned nodded towards them. "See what I mean?"

"Mmmm, perhaps you're right."

As the night wore on the Yanks, stripped of their assets, drifted out. Those who were dead drunk were either dragged out by their mates or remained where they had fallen. As they left the bar, girls drifted across to Donkey and Ned who took their time to pick the best of the bunch available, paid their money and were led away to the so-called bedrooms. On the way they walked past a big black sergeant collapsed over a table. His green cap, with dull black sergeant's bars, sat invitingly on the table.

Ned picked it up and tried it on for size. It fitted like a glove.

"Hey, thanks man, that's myteee generous of you." Ned lurched away with his souvenir. The sergeant slept on.

The bedroom was one of many in what seemed like a huge hall split up into cubicles by six-foot high partitions. A thin horsehair mattress lay on the floor. Cries of phoney female ecstasy floated up and down the corridors, *keeping the customer satisfied*.

Gard-damn!

Donkey laid back on the hard mattress staring at the ceiling. Satisfuckshun? His bird hadn't even bothered to breathe hard. Mid-way through he'd asked her if she wanted an apple. And, for crying out loud, she'd said no, but . . .

"You gimme money for burger. Me hungly. I go get burger. Come back. Yes, I plomise, I come back. Make numbah wahn boom-boom."

His cock crashed. He had given her a dollar and told her to didi mau. He knew she wouldn't be back and didn't care. He rolled over to try to sleep. The faint sounds of the jukebox, still playing in the adjacent bar, drifted into the knock-shop. It was the most popular song in Vietnam.

We gotta get outta this place,

If it's the last thing we ever do-o.

"Right on, brother!" he muttered as another song, just as familiar, drifted in from an adjacent cubicle. *“Good old Coll . . .”*

“Fucking shut up Jansen you arse’ole!” he shouted, rolled over and went to sleep.

It was a couple of days later that Donkey received a nasty shock. He had rolled out of bed in the morning and gone into the bathroom to empty his bladder. He began to pee — and almost leapt through the roof.

"Holy shit!" he screeched. He stopped peeing.

"What's wrong?" muttered Ned, still half asleep.

"I dunno. I sort of got an electric shock in me old fella."

Donkey tentatively touched the pissaphone to see if it was live. It seemed all right. He began peeing again.

"Kerrrr-rriii-sstttt!" he squealed through gritted teeth. This time he couldn't stop peeing. The stinging pain in his old fella was pure murder — and by now he knew what it was.

So did Ned. And he was absolutely delighted. He leapt out of bed and bounced into the bathroom, pounding Donkey on the back.

"You bloody beauty! You've got the clap! Ha ha! Welcome to the club!"

"For Christ's sake shut up! I don't want the world to know!"

He was too late. Ned had rushed to the door and run into the hotel's atrium shouting "Clap! clap! clap!" Heads poked around doors to see what the fuss was all about. Ned didn't disappoint them.

"Donkey's sliding down the razor blades of life using his balls as a brake!"

An enormous cheer went up followed by the traditional collective chant: "Clap! clap clap clap clap clap clap!"

"Unclean!" shouted Ned.

"Unclean!" replied the chorus.

And so the song went on, in the style of a Gregorian chant.

"Dirty bugger!"

"Dirty bugger!"

"Drippy dick!"

"Drippy dick!"

"Unclean!"

"Unclean!"

"Clap! clap clap clap clap clap . . ."

Donkey was mortified. Every bugger in the entire Free World would know about this before lunch, he reasoned miserably. But then they'd find out anyway, as soon as they saw him in the queue at the RAP that morning. He flopped down on his bed trying to ignore the racket outside his room and looked down at himself. A miserable private contemplating his miserable privates. Christ! he thought. A week of pissing razor blades! How am I going to stand that!

"Why me," he muttered, "why is it always me?"

"It's NSU," the doctor told him later that morning.

Donkey hadn't heard of that one. It frightened hell out of him.

"What's that?"

"A mild form of gonorrhoea," the doctor said, much to Donkey's relief. Thank God it wasn't the dreaded Saigon Rose, for which, it was rumored, there was no cure.

"Take these penicillin tablets three times a day and it will be cleared up in a week. But no booze for a week either."

"No booze?"

"No booze. Unless, of course, you wish to accentuate the razor blades."

"My God no," said Donkey.

"Now, the paperwork. Where did you get this, er, disease?"

"At your joint. The one you blokes reckon you keep clean."

"The Alabammy Mammy?"

"Yep, that's it."

"Are you sure?"

"The evidence is dripping right before your eyes. And I haven't been anywhere else."

"Do you know the girl?"

"No."

"Do you think you could recognise her."

"Not unless she has a hamburger stuffed in her mouth."

"What?"

"Never mind, no, I doubt it. I was a bit molly."

"No doubt," the doctor sniffed. "You blokes usually are when you get yourselves loaded. One load leads to another." He smiled at his own dry humor. "Right oh, off you go. We'll have to give all those girls a check-up again, I suppose. Can't you blokes be more careful?"

"It was your bloody clean house," accused Donkey.

The doctor ignored him.

"Fair dinkum, I came over here to treat wounded soldiers and all I get, morning after morning, is a short-arms parade. What a load of crap!" he snorted.

"Clap," corrected Donkey. He marched out.

CHAPTER 23

When General Dong heard about the stranger in Vung Tau hospital who matched the description of the woman he was looking for, he grabbed his command Cobra helicopter gunship and flew there immediately.

He had spent the time since she disappeared in mortal terror, imagining that he would be arrested at any moment. He was petrified that she had been taken by Ky's secret police for interrogation; that somehow, Ky — or his puppet master, Cowboy Cassidy — had got on to his traitorous duplicity. He was immensely relieved when he saw for himself that the mystery woman was Mai Li.

But he soon discovered he had another problem. She was deeply comatose. The doctors explained that she had come extremely close to death, that her coma was deep, that more than likely her brain had been damaged.

It was possible, maybe even probable, she could recover, yes, but to what extent, they didn’t know. They could also only guess as to when — even if — she would come out of the coma. Only thenwould they be able to ascertain brain damage.

He looked down at his Mata Hari. No longer was Jilly beautiful. Ugly scars had scabbed over her face and upper body; most of her teeth had been broken or knocked out; her nose was mashed, broken in several places; her eyes were black, puffed and swollen; her head had been shaved by the doctors to tend her wounds and her broken right arm was in plaster.

Who had done this, he wondered, and why? He had to find out, and fast. With Mai Li now out of commission he had lost his eyes and ears in the Australian camp. What were they doing now? So what was it about Simpson? A general's secretary, a private, who had been moved to Public Relations? Very strange. Perhaps he was not what he seemed, perhaps Mai Li had discovered this, but what was it?

As he sat by her bedside, he reviewed his position.

Whatever the outcome of the war, General Dong felt he could not lose. When the north won, he would be regarded as a hero of the revolution. And soon he would take the big step from commander of South Vietnam's most important province, Bien Hoa, to commander of all the armies, to the Vice Presidency itself, and then . . .

But he never did like leaving things to chance. What if, by some amazing chance, Simpson did succeed in killing Ho Chi Minh? Would he be in a position to take advantage of it, here in Saigon? No! Should be warn Hanoi? Would they believe him? The Australians had upset his plans, his timing. Maybe he should dispose of Simpson, just in case, and hasten his plans — no, he corrected himself, he should not forget his partner — *their plans*, of a coup against Ky. Cassidy and the Americans would back them. He believed they would have no choice.

In the meantime, part of his responsibilities for both sides was to keep an eye on the Australians. So far they had done a very good job for President Thieu and the Americans in their province, Phuoc Tuy, which abutted Bien Hoa to the south-east. They had earned the respect of the NVA and VC through their military skills and were becoming more than a nuisance in any plans to soften the underbelly of Saigon. Their guerrilla-style search and destroy tactics had proved a nuisance, and on the few occasions they had been confronted in force, had fought very well. Dong reflected on the battle which the Australians called Carol. Really, that artillery base should have been overrun easily. Mai Li had obtained excellent information from Swanker before that operation and he had passed it on. It was only the ferocity of the Australians defending their guns which saved Fire Support Base Carol from being overrun and its entire company annihilated. And then there had been the nuclear missiles. What a propaganda coup that had been! So what was it, he began puzzling again, what startling information was it that Mai Li had which had lead to the attempt on her life? Certainly, she had been left for dead. What had she told him the last time he had spoken to her, on the doorstep of her house? *"My general, there is more coming, and soon, and even bigger than the last, much, much bigger."* He had to find out what it was, somehow!

Despite her delicate condition, General Dong ordered that she be moved as comfortably as possible in his helicopter gunship to a secure room in the Vietnamese military hospital in Saigon. There, in the care of the best doctors in Vietnam, she would have to reveal her secrets, no matter what the cost.

Until then, he decided, there was time. The lion stalks carefully before the kill.

***

Donkey's dose of the clap has slowed him down considerably, the no-

booze rule virtually restricting him to his duties during the day and his room of a night. He really didn't feel much like playing anyway with both the women in his life out of reach, Allison thousands of miles away and after so much time little more than a mirage while Jilly had simply disappeared into even thinner air. He spent a lot of time wondering about his feelings for both of them, without being able to form any definite conclusions. Indeed, he wondered if he would ever see Jilly again. "Sin Loi," he heard himself saying bitterly. "She's just another fucking Nog anyway." He shook his head sadly. No, he didn't really mean that. Or did he? The place had finally got him, corrupted him, robbed him of compassion, stolen his soul. He was just another war hardened, hating, hurting arsehole who could no longer see beyond Number One. He knew it and couldn't give a shit. He had joined the madding, maddened crowd. He dismissed the thought and returned to his letter writing, this one to Allison.

I got two tapes from home yesterday, and a great parcel of Christmas presents. That was tremendous. One of the tapes was the one where you're all singing around the piano. It was quite good except it made me awfully homesick.

It's only seventeen weeks until I come home, or from today, 121 days and a wake-up (that's the morning we fly out). It's good to hear, too, that preparations for our wedding are going smoothly.

The Padre went home yesterday and his replacement didn't turn up on the incoming flight so I'm doing two jobs at the moment. We were sort of sorry and glad to see him go. We were all envious of course but he did his twelve months (he didn't go nuts either but Fred reckons he was nuts when he got here anyway). Still, only 21 days to go and I'll be a short-timer — less than 100 days to go. My RTA calendar in our room is looking quite healthy now — crosses all over almost nine months!

I've kept the best until last! I got your photos yesterday. I went mad upon first glimpse of them, racing around the room screaming all sorts of things! I just love your bikini even if it is a trifle on the too-much-material side!

That's it for now my darling. I'll sign off because I've got heaps of other letters to write. See you soon. Love, Brian.

He was about to start another letter when Ned burst into the room swearing. "I wish to Christ I had never taken that prick SS in on the Jeep deal. He's just a pain in the arse."

"Why, what's he want now?"

"Do you remember me promising him a weekend with Fanny at Vungers?"

"Yep, something like that."

"Did I? I couldn't have!"

"Guaranteed him he'd get his rocks off, too, if I recall."

"Shit!"

"You keep opening that big mouth of yours."

"You've got to help me out of . . ."

"No way, brother!"

"Shit, the last time I saw Fanny I called her a pox-box."

"She did leave you somewhat unclean."

"Yeah, but she still won't talk to me, you can bet on that!"

"If you're waving enough money, she'll talk."

"A weekend for two at Vungers is going to cost me more than what I paid for the fucking Jeep!"

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you made the promise to SS."

"I've got to start thinkin' here. There has to be a way out. Hey, I wonder if Fanny's still got the jack? Maybe she could give it to SS!"

"That is still going to cost you money."

"Not as much as a weekend in Vungers. If, say, we promise him the Jeep for the weekend after next, and get him loaded up in the next couple of days, he'll be pissing razor blades just before he's due to go to Vungers. He'll have to cancel!" He twisted an arm up his back and patted himself. "Jesus, Ned, you're fucking brilliant."

"Provided Fanny's still loaded."

Donkey was right. Ned approached Fanny waving money and after initially boxing him around the ears a few times she listened. No, she said, she was clean again but she could easily find a girl who was not. She could arrange the whole thing.

"Hundled dollar," she demanded.

"A hundred bucks! You gotta be outta your mind!"

They agreed on fifty, twenty five for the girl and twenty five for Fanny. "Still more than I paid for the fuckin' Jeep," Ned moaned later, “but in the end, I suppose it was well worth it.”

The plan worked well, up to a point. That night Ned lured SS out on the town, saying Fanny's bar had a new girl. She pounced when SS walked in and wouldn't leave him alone. He was rapt, and ecstatic when she offered him

jigajig, "for you, first time, free."

Ned and Donkey had left him to it, the girl had taken him home and he had mounted her, as hard as he'd ever been. He couldn't believe it. At last! He was absolutely locked in . . . like Flynn! After 11 frustrating months he had finally made it. He was about to make his first full thrust when he made a mistake.

"YAHOO!" he yelled in triumph.

The girl got such a fright she jumped beneath him and they toppled, locked together, off the bed, in a tangle of arms and legs.

"OW OW OW!" screamed SS. "Me cock, me cock! It's broke, it's broke, you've broken me cock!" he accused the girl.

"Did you hear about poor old SS?" the Transport corporal told Ned the next morning. "He broke his old fella. They're sending him home. WIA, they reckon!" He laughed, tears rolling down his cheeks. Everybody laughed until tears rolled down their cheeks. And a day after SS got home he started pissing razor blades, broken digit and all.

***

General Dong told no-one Jilly had been found. His police had told him, after checking Jilly's bloodied Vung Tau villa, that her attacker was probably a male Caucasian. They had clear fingerprints from the whiskey bottle but they matched nothing on their primitive filing system. There was no other evidence but someone had to be blamed. Why not a foreign serviceman?

Dong's doctors tried for a week to bring Mai Li out of her coma and failed.

"She's been badly traumatised as well as physically damaged," they told him, "it may be weeks, even years, before we can bring her back to us. Even then, who knows?" They left the question hanging.

General Dong knew he was running out of time. It was vital, he insisted, the doctors keep trying something, anything. Was there something they had not tried? Anything at all?

What might work, they all agreed, was a mental stimulus, an emotional shock, which could thaw her frozen mind. Was there someone close to her, family, husband who could simply come in, talk to her, hold her hand? No, he had replied, her family had all been killed in the war. Boyfriend? Perhaps. He turned to his secretary. "Call the Australians," he said, "General Melville-Smith".

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General Melville-Smith immediately called his Chief of Staff into

conference, and sent for Errington.

"Paul, I've just had a call from Dong. They've found that interpreter woman of ours, what was her name? Jilly, yes. Strange name for a Vietnamese. But never mind. Ah, Corporal Errington, come in, we have some news."

He explained the situation. "Dong wonders if we'd allow Simpson to talk to her, see if that wakes her up. He seems to believe he and the girl had something going. I wasn't aware the matter had got to the stage of serious romance, corporal?"

"I'm not sure about that sir, but then again, Donkey has expressed quite some concern about her since her disappearance." He coughed. "I might also add, sir, that he's got VD at the moment, and he didn't get it from her."

The general grinned. "Well that would rule out true love from his viewpoint, wouldn't you think Paul?"

"You could certainly not hold him up as a model of fidelity, no sir!"

"Well, how does that leave us . . . Operation Santa Claus?"

"For a start, I think we have to assume, sir, that Jilly told Dong about the operation, both phases," advised Errington.

"I wonder," the brigadier mused, chin in hand. "Natasha told you she had not told Dong — only Cassidy — about the Phase Three plan to assassinate Ky. And if you recall, she said Dong was away in the field the day Jilly went to Vung Tau so how would she have got a message to him? Would she risk a messenger? Not likely. And another thing. If he did know, wouldn't he be doubling his efforts to ingratiate himself with Cassidy, to get his support for his ascension to the throne?"

"Good point," the general said. "Cowboy has been expecting him on the doorstep but he's made no move yet."

"And Natasha says he hasn't confided in her," Errington volunteered. "By the way, she's working for us now, and General Cassidy of course, and not Dong. She's seen the error of her ways."

"Or more likely which side her bread's buttered," the brigadier commented, quickly returning to the subject. "All those things considered, I'd tend to punt on Dong not knowing Phase Three and he's waiting to see what he can get out of Jilly, believing he's still in control of the situation, despite the fact that he's lost his eyes and ears in our camp, lost track of what we're doing, our timing . . ."

"In relation to what he believes Operation Santa Claus to be all about, the assassination of Ho Chi Minh."

"Yes, and he might even believe Simpson tried to kill Jilly because she got too close. He might want to get his hands on him by using this coma story as an excuse.”

Errington scratched his head behind his left ear. "There’s one point we may have overlooked. If you recall, Donkey was in Vung Tau with the film team doing Christmas messages at the time of the assault."

The general and brigadier looked at one another, incredulous. "You're not suggesting, corporal, that it was Simpson who bashed this woman?" The general queried.

"No sir, but . . ."

"Harding!" the general barked loudly through the open door of his office before remembering Harding was away on R&R, "ah, Corporal Nickoli! I think we need to talk to Corporal Simpson immediately. Get him for us please."

Nickoli had been all ears in the outer office but he had heard very little that made any sense. He wasn’t quite close enough, but what he had heard and did understand, that Jilly had been found and was in hospital in a coma, caused him to go as white as a sheet.

"Sir!" He managed to squeak, immediately picking up the phone and dialling the PR office number. Donkey answered the phone. "The general wants to see you, now!"

"What for?"

"Don't ask. Just get here, fast!"

"Shit, what have I done?"

"Didn't you hear me!" Nickoli hissed.

"All right, all right. I'm on my way."

The general explained the situation to Donkey selectively. He said Jilly had been found, alive, but badly beaten. She was now in a coma in a Saigon hospital.

Donkey sighed wearily, relieved. "Well, at least she's alive."

"Only just, apparently corporal. I understand you were, ah, close to the girl."

Donkey looked up at the general, startled. "We worked together sir."

"I think you know what I mean, corporal."

How in the hell did he know that? Donkey wondered. The only person who knew was Ned and he wouldn't say anything. Well, however he had found out, it didn't really matter. He knew.

"We, ah, enjoyed one another's company a couple of times, sir, yes."

The general grunted. "I understand you were in Vung Tau on the day this incident happened."

Donkey thought for a moment. "Yes sir, we were filming. No! Actually, we had that afternoon off. Went into town for lunch and then, ah, went back to the Badcoe Club for the night." Donkey didn't think the story of the beer bottle relevant.

"So you had someone with you all day and night?"

"Yes sir."

"Corporal, we have to check that out."

Donkey was suddenly incredulous, realising the purpose of the questions. "Sir, what the hell's going on? You don't think I did this do you sir?"

The general stared at his former secretary. No, he didn't believe Simpson had done it but he had to be sure. He felt guilty, too, about having used this reluctant soldier to do such dirty work. But what was done was done. He had a right to know what was going on, some if it anyway. But not everything, not just yet.

"Corporal, we have reason to believe that General Dong suspects you as the perpetrator of this assault, attempted murder, actually. He hasn't said as much but he has asked for our help — your help specifically — in trying to bring this woman around. The doctors believe that if someone to whom the woman feels particularly attached can visit her, talk to her, then maybe that could break the coma. General Dong feels you might be the best bet, considering your personal liaison with her."

"Yes sir, of course I'll help if I can. I'd love to see her anyway."

"We have to look after your interests too, corporal. If General Dong suspects you in this case, he may have something else in mind for you as well. You will be accompanied by MPs, three o'clock this afternoon."

When the office cleared at lunchtime, Nickoli stayed back. As soon as he was alone he rang Swanker at Vung Tau.

"What did you do?" he wailed. "She's alive. In a coma. In hospital. She's not dead. Did you hear me, she's not dead!"

Swanker was shocked. For a moment he couldn't believe his ears. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"And Simpson! You said we were going to get Simpson. He's helping them, trying to get her out of the coma. What if she comes out of the coma? What then? What about Simpson? When are you going to get Simpson?"

"Calm down you stupid arsehole!" Swanker hissed. He made Nickoli repeat everything he had heard. He thought quickly. "Look, we're all right as long as she stays in that coma. For God's sake, don't panic. If the situation changes, let me know immediately, right?"

"Okay," replied Nickoli, feeling a little foolish. "Yes, all right. Sorry,. I . . ."

"Get off the phone," he ordered.

Swanker slumped back into his chair. Alive! It's not possible! She was dead when he dumped her in the sea! He was sure of it. How could he confirm this news? Errington! Quickly he rang his former Saigon phone number. Errington answered and confirmed Nickoli's news.

"But how did you find out so quickly sir? We've only just found out ourselves here."

"Ah, a mutual friend rang me. Knew I was a friend of Jilly's and said he thought I'd like to know she was okay."

"Oh. But I don't know whether I'd say she was okay sir. The report we have is that she is likely to be brain damaged or, if not, have severe amnesia."

"I hope they get the animal, corporal, I really do." He felt easier when he put the phone down, although it had probably been a mistake to ring Errington. He hadn't thought that through. He had almost been caught. But if Jilly was as bad as Errington said she was maybe he didn't have anything to worry about. The only thing he could do now was wait and see.

Donkey was severely shocked when he saw Jilly. He stared, disbelieving, tears springing into his eyes. Hesitantly he sat down in a chair next to her bed and took her right hand.

"Oh Jilly, Jilly, what happened, what happened? How could anyone do this to you?" He was alone with her, despite the presence of Bradshaw, Dong, two Australian MPs, three armed ARVN Ranger MPs and three doctors.

He spoke to her softly for twenty minutes, caressing her hand, willing her to wake, but there was no response. He ran out of words, his distress palpable. General Dong offered him a glass of chilled water. He took it gratefully, swallowing it all. The general took the glass back from him, very carefully. "Thank you sir," he said. He turned to Bradshaw, "sir, I can't . . . you know . . . I . . ."

"Okay, that's enough." Bradshaw turned to Dong. "Sorry general."

"Maybe you come back, try again sometime, yes?"

Donkey nodded. As the Australians left, he turned to Bradshaw, tears

welling again in his eyes. "Do you realise, sir, it's Christmas Eve?"

CHAPTER 24

My Dearest Allison,

It's Christmas Day. And Christmas Day in Saigon is not Christmas Day at home, believe me. I wish to hell I was home with you now. I'm a wee bit inebriated which means DRUNK! But I reckon this is the best way to spend Christmas Day away from home.

It just seems like another day to us. I'd give anything to be home now having a sober Christmas with my family and you, darling.

But I'll tell you what I did today. I slept in until about nine thirty and then caught a cab to church and went to Mass. This afternoon I spent reading and sleeping and our Christmas dinner began at six o'clock and it was pretty good. We had prawns, oysters and everything else that goes with Christmas — Barossa Pearl and red wine and VB (of course!) The general and chief of staff came around for half an hour and I had a few words with the COS who's a great bloke but I didn't get to bash the general's ear.

I've received twenty eight Christmas cards so far. We've now got two rows of them strung across a wall of our room.

I just hope you saw me on the TV Christmas messages. I only wish I could have seen you on TV. It really would have made Christmas mean something to me. I find myself thinking more and more of you, home and everything else back in Australia but it seems so hard to imagine that in less than one hundred days I'll be in a completely different land — and at home again. This place tends to grow on you whether you like it or not and you become so accustomed to it that it doesn't seem conceivable that in a matter of 11 hours or so you can be dragged out of here and dropped back into civilisation again. I've grown so used to this place I don't think I'll know what to expect when I get home.

The Padre's replacement has arrived (thank God!) and he's not a bad sort of bloke although he does tend to be a bit on the wild side.

Happy Christmas darling, and have a Happy New Year. As from April, I can guarantee you a happy New Year.

Ninety six and a wakey!

***

Cowboy Cassidy was pleasantly pissed. It had been a helluva Christmas party. “Y’know girlie,” he slurred, “this little ol’ war’s gonna be over a lot quicker than we think.”

“How so?” the pretty Vietnamese asked.

Cassidy looked around furtively. “Top Secret info, what I’m about to tell you now. Listen to this: Uncle Ho is a very sick man, has been for a fortnight or so. Hell, he might even be dead by now.”

She was startled. “How? . . . what? . . .”

“Don’t know yet but it appears he may have been poisoned.” He laughed. “Well, that’s the story I want you to tell our friend Dong. Tell ‘im Ho’s boys are looking for a Russian advisor who’s disappeared. That’ll get the traitorous little bastard thinking.”

Natasha ruined General Dong’s Christmas dinner. Simpson! His brain reeled. He went to Danang about that time. Could he have really gone to Hanoi, poisoned the Great Leader? Fear suddenly gripped his heart. If they find out I knew about Simpson and did nothing . . . he had to check out this story of Cassidy’s — but they would deny it of course, even to him, he quickly realised. So it was now absolutely imperative that Jilly wake, remember, talk.

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Donkey spent an hour a day for the next week by Jilly's bedside, talking to her. On New Year's Day he wept bitterly, his head resting on her right hand.

That night he got very drunk. "Ned, I just couldn't say it mate, I just couldn't say it", he repeated over and over. "I just couldn't say to her 'Happy New Year'. She'll never make it mate, she'll never make it." The next day he flew out to Hong Kong on R&R. Somehow he was determined to put it all behind him, enjoy himself. Somehow. Wasn’t that what you were supposed to do on R&R?

CHAPTER 25

Hong Kong blew Donkey's mind right off its tracks and he returned to Saigon head over heels in love with a Chinese bargirl. When Bassett heard that he erupted.

"What! You go all the way to Hong Kong, to civilisation again, and finish up in the cot with another bloody slant-eye? You're unbelievable! You've been here too long! Ned's right, you've gone troppo! All that round-eye in Hong Kong and you go and get yourself another slant-eye bargirl!"

"It wasn't like that!"

"Wasn't like what? You paid didn't you?"

"No . . . well, not on the first night, anyway."

"You bloody dopey prick. Of course you don't pay on the first night! But you paid good and fucking proper for the other four nights, didn't you!"

"Well . . ."

"What a bloody idiot!”

"It wasn't like that at all!" Donkey shouted. "So fuckin' shuddup!"

Bassett was wrong, Donkey told himself. It really hadn't been like that. She had been tremendous. She had filled an enormous vacuum.

Donkey sulked back into his typewriter, his thoughts back in Hong Kong. It had been dark when he got to his hotel. The room was palatial compared to his digs in Saigon. Soft bed, plush high-pile carpet and a private balcony overlooking Hong Kong Harbor. It was another world, a strange, vibrant, exotic, exciting world.

Then there was the phone call home. He spoke to everyone, Allison, Mum, Dad, his brothers and sisters. It was tremendously exciting. Continually he brushed tears from his eyes as he listened to voices so near and yet so far away, voices so dear, so precious. Family. But twenty minutes flew like three and he had to hang up.

He was still grinning when he opened a can of beer from the room's well stocked mini-fridge. But by the time the can was drained he was in the depths of depression. While he was on the phone he felt as though he could reach out and touch everything and everyone who was so special to him. That feeling of magic dissolved quickly after he rang off. He tried to hold that

feeling, that joy but, like a dream it drifted away, a feather on a mountain stream gliding gently over ripples and swirls and bubbling, chortling falls to disappear in the mist. He walked out on to the balcony and looked over the harbor, the lights of Hong Kong Island shimmering in its waters, beckoning, *go man go*. It was magnificent and it wasn't. No, home and family was the only paradise.

He thought about going to bed — it was ten o'clock — but he knew he'd never sleep. Not now, anyway. He was too churned up inside, miserable. But how could he go out? He had no civilian clothes and the Army had ordered that uniforms were not to be worn at R&R venues except on flights in and out. And yet he had to do something.

"Bugger this!" he muttered loudly. "I can't afford to waste any of this trip."

He went downstairs to the hotel's foyer and found a clothes shop. He paid far too much for a shirt, sports coat, pair of trousers and shoes and headed for the Hong Kong Island ferry.

He found the European nightclub where Bassett had told him he would find the girl he had shacked up with only three weeks earlier on his R&R. She was a waitress there but tonight, he was told, was her night off. He hung around for about an hour slowly drinking American beer but it was a quiet night and the few people there were huddled over tables minding their own business.

He left and wandered the streets. The prospect of shopping over the next few days excited him as he looked in store windows packed with goods of all descriptions. He came across a street of girlie bars, huge, glittering palaces. But it was just like Saigon. Yanks everywhere, money showering like confetti at a wedding. Noise, razzamatazz, jingle, jangle, the girls with kaleidoscope eyes . . .

Shit! I got out of Saigon to get away from all this, Donkey suddenly realised. Was there no escaping the madness? Was it all tangerine trees and marmalade skies? Cellophane flowers of yellow and green? Plasticine porters with looking glass ties? Was there no reality? Or was *this* reality? He felt like Alice in Wonderland.

He retraced his steps to the ferry terminal and went back to the Kowloon side, wandering the streets again, too morose, too depressed to go back to his hotel, all alone in a sea of people. He poked his head into a lonely bar not fifty yards from his hotel. It was quiet, almost empty. One beer here, he

thought, then I'll go back to the hotel and bed.

There were only three people inside, a gloomy, lonely, drunk American slumped on a stool ; a friendly and talkative mamasan and a beautiful Chinese girl behind the bar. Donkey instantly regretted walking into the place but he thought, what the hell, it's quiet and I need a beer. And he needed to talk to someone, anyone.

But so too did the American. Between telling Donkey what a lousy deal he'd been dealt by fate he pestered the girl to go back to his hotel with him. She declined, time and again. The American persisted. Finally the girl had a bright idea. She pointed to Donkey. "I must go him."

Donkey was shocked. While the prospect didn't displease him, he hadn't even given it a moment's thought. And now he expected a whack in the eye from the American. Instead, he put out his hand, shook Donkey's, muttered something unintelligible, fell off his stool and staggered out of the bar.

Her name was Lucy, she said, just Lucy. Back in his hotel room they talked and made love and talked some more, just small-talk, in broken English. But it was enough. She lifted him from the depths of despair, made him forget his immediate past — and disappeared in the morning, demanding that he come and see her again that night. He said he would but had no intention of doing so.

He spent the day shopping, most of it at Favourite Clothiers, an Indian tailor's shop where he had been told Qantas staff shopped, selecting materials for suits and shirts, being measured and fitted and drinking free scotch and dry, his own spirits high. This was the life!

That night he went in search of Bassett's round-eye again. She wasn't at the bar again. So alone in a strange city, vibrantly alive yet dead, he headed back to Lucy.

For four days and four nights they were constant companions. She took him shopping, bartering for him. They ate in the best restaurants; she even took him up to her high-rise flat where they made love on her bed and then in the bath. He even met her mother.

When he left Hong Kong he was in love again. Sure he'd paid, but it had been worth every cent of it. She wasn't a bargirl whore, well, not the normal type anyway. More of an escort, a guide, in a strange city. A friend, a lover . . .

It just hadn't been like Bassett had suggested. She had been something special, beautiful, his own *Lucy in the sky with diamonds.*

Returning to Saigon was all the more bitter for the experience. Less than three months to go now, he reminded himself, gritting his teeth.

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General Dong was pleased to see Donkey back. The finger prints he had left on the glass during his first visit to see Jilly had not matched those on the whisky bottle. So, at least, any suspicion about him being Jilly's attacker had been quashed. But he still remained a mystery and Dong was determined to — had to — find out just who he really was, why Jilly had been so interested in him. It still seemed very difficult to believe he had had something to do with Ho Chi Minh's mysterious illness (which for some odd reason had still not reached the ears of the western press and therefore had not been officially denied by Hanoi. Why would not Cassidy want to capitalise on that?). His own sources had reassured him that the great leader was still in the best of health but he was very familiar with the machinations of the communist propaganda machine and so harboured some doubts. He had quizzed Natasha, carefully, about the sources of Cassidy's information but she had learned little more, swearing that the American had been very insistent that they were impeccable. There was one thing, though, which she had prised from him: Dong, he had said, was the only southern general he could trust and that he, Cassidy, was devising an ultra secret operation which would take full advantage of what he had said (only yesterday) was "Uncle Ho's very tenuous grip on life" as though he fully expected him to die in the not too distant future from this very mysterious illness. At the appropriate time, Dong would be brought into the picture "at the highest possible level", he had told her.

What did all that mean? His co-conspirator was getting nervous, urging him to bring forward their plans for a strike against Ky. How would they be affected? Already he had instructed Natasha to redouble her efforts with Cassidy and, through Errington, find out more about Simpson and Operation Santa Claus. Yes, Operation Santa Claus, he reflected. It had been Christmas Day when he had learned of Ho's illness. Coincidence or deliberate, very good planning?

As well as stationing the two guards outside the door of Jilly's room whenever Donkey was with her, he secretly taped everything Simpson said. That really didn't lead Dong anywhere. Much as he tried, there was nothing he could read into anything on the transcripts. If only he could get rid of those Australian guards he had with him everywhere he went. But no, that

approach would be far too dangerous.

He decided on another angle. He would ask General Melville-Smith if Harding and Swanker could try to help Jilly. Maybe it was one of them who had attacked her.

On his first day back at Jilly's bedside after his Hong Kong trip Donkey really didn't have much to say. He had a new secret, there was a new girl in his life, and he could only feel pity for Jilly, just another victim of the war which wasn't really a war but which killed and maimed people anyway (almost it seemed for the hell of it), turned others into vegetables and made hundreds of thousands into refugees, homeless, beggars, without self respect. *Sin Loi. Ain't no fun bein' a loser, baby.*

The next day he told her all about Hong Kong. He began by talking to himself, more or less. He was convinced she couldn't hear him anyway and he wanted to talk through a few of his own problems, with himself, about Allison, Lucy, "and yes, I have to put you in there with them too Jilly. I just wish I could sort it out. I can't love the three of you, surely!"

It was during this attempt to sort out his own problems that he thought he felt a tiny pressure in his right hand from hers. He jumped, grabbing her hand in both of his, and leaned over the bed towards her. "Jilly, Jilly, can you heard me?"

There was no response. He tried again and again, talking avidly, excitedly, trying to get another tiny touch from her hand, maybe a twitch of an eyelid, something, anything. But there was nothing. He began to think that perhaps he had imagined it. He left Jilly that afternoon doubly depressed.

***

"Wake up Donkey!"

"Huh?"

"Where have you been these past few minutes. Back in Hong Kong? Back on the nest with that Ching sheila?"

He and Bassett were in the I House piano bar, sipping Heinekens. Donkey had, indeed, been thinking about Hong Kong. And home, and in Hong Kong again and home . . . he'd been back from Hong Kong for a week now and his muddled mind was still in a whirl. For a week he'd copped lashings of verbal flak from Bassett. What about Allison, he had said to him repeatedly. He had taken the mickey out of him, unmercifully. Sailors had wives in two ports, not soldiers. He had even called him a Noggie lover. God, what a mess!

"Yeah," he sighed, sipping his beer, "I suppose I was."

"Hey look mate," said Bassett. Donkey thought he detected a tone of sympathy. "You've got to come back to earth, back to reality."

"Just like that, eh?"

"No, not just like that. Look, this Chinese sheila might have been everything you say she was. You had a great time with her, she was a terrific companion, etcetera, etcetera, as you said. But face the facts. What about Allison? You're supposed to marry her as soon as you get home, remember?"

"Things change."

"And people, mate."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"So you're going to write to Allison and tell her the wedding's off. A Dear Joan."

"No . . . shit! I dunno!" Donkey squirmed on the bar stool, fidgeted with his drink, spreading wet circles on the bar. "I dunno what to think any more. And there's something else you don't know, I suppose I might as well tell you. I had a thing going for awhile with Jilly, too.

"I know. Ned mentioned it to me. I was wondering when you would get around to admitting it."

"Now she's nothing more than a vegie."

"There is a war on."

"So people keep saying. What I'd like to know is why?"

"If you could answer that question we could all go home."

"Everything's fucked up."

"In your head."

"Maybe."

"There's no maybe about it old mate. Look, you've been in this fucked up country now for nine months . . ."

"Nine and a half."

"Well, nine and a half. Don't you realise that you've changed? Been changed? Don't you believe this so-called war has had an effect on you? Do you think you're someone special, that you're the only one feeling fucked up? That this fuckin' hell-hole has effected nobody but you? We all get hit, mate, in one way or another. Nobody goes home mummy's little Johnny any more. How the hell could we? Christ almighty, have a look around you! Is this reality? Is this what we're expecting when we get home? Is this what we left when we came over here? Of course it's not! Australia is real, it's sanity . . . well, apart from those arse'oles running around with NVA flags . . . but this

place is pure *insanity*! Can't you see how it screws up minds, turns them around . . ."

"Until you're spinning in ever decreasing circles and your head disappears up your own arse."

"Exactly!"

Donkey smiled, continuing to stare into his beer.

"You're probably right. How can this fucking place not change anyone? How could I even think of ditching Allison? I must be out of my mind. Jesus mate, when I get home I'll be forgetting about this place so fast . . ."

"Me too. If we can."

"Speaking of you, shit! I've been so wrapped up in my own problems I haven't even given a thought to those of other people — like you! What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I seem to recall that someone sitting quite close to me also has a fiancee back home — and a round-eye here in whom he professes to be rapt."

"Betty-Anne?"

"The same. How long have you been shacking up with her now?"

"Two, nearly three months."

"What are you going to do about her?"

It was Bassett's turn to go on the defensive, slip into his shell. "I don't know. Fair dinkum, I don't know what to do. I love her, I've been away from Diana for so long . . ."

"No longer than I've been away from Allison."

"No, but . . . ah shit, Donkey, I don't know what to do either."

"I seem to have heard that somewhere quite close, quite recently."

"It's different! Your sheila was a slope!"

"No different at all. You're still going to have to choose between them."

"That's the hard part. They've both got good points and bad points. I dunno."

"Good and bad. Right. Let's go through them, mark them down and see who wins."

Bassett agreed reluctantly. As he analysed each girl, point by point, Donkey drew a plus or a minus with a wet finger on the bar. He refused to let Bassett sidetrack himself, which he tried to do often. The analysis lasted for more than an hour.

"Well, there you go. Diana wins by a street. Bye, bye Miss American pie.

Sin Loi. Sorry 'bout dat."

Bassett looked at Donkey's wet scorecard. He grinned.

"She's still great nookie though!"

"You're fucking hopeless! Fair dinkum, your brains are in your cock! When are you going to grow up?"

Bassett was still grinning. "I've got a couple of months yet. Sixty and a wakey, to be exact."

"Hey you guys!" It was Logan. "How about an Arzzie song ?"

Donkey and Fred looked at one another. Why not? For free piss, anything! And they had a new beginning for their show.

It was the song of the bargirl to the tight fisted Australian:

Uc Da Loi, Cheap Char-lee
He no buy me Saigon tea.
Saigon tea cost many, many pee,
Uc Da Loi he Cheap Char-lee!

That got their show on the road:

And the word was passed around
That the crazy Arzzie double,
Were singin' for a pound.

They played to a packed house. The free beer flowed. The Yanks laughed, clapped and sang in their velvet draped oasis, *getting by with a little help from their friends.* Yeah!

"Unreal, man!" they chorused.

Unreal . . .

***

Donkey took the steps to the Chief of Staff's office two at a time. He burst in excitedly. "She's awake sir, she's awake!" He didn't notice Nickoli's face go white.

He had definitely felt the pressure in his hand this time. Then she had tried to smile, then talk. She spoke his name, he thought, but he had to admit it was little more than a weak expulsion of air. But she was awake, well, sort of awake, for a minute or so. Then she had fallen asleep. The doctors had declared the coma “possibly” broken. The questions which now could be answered were whether she had suffered brain damage and if not, amnesia. Within the next few days they would know, they said.

Major Three-Bob was already in Saigon, at General Dong's request, so as soon as he could, Nickoli sought out the major.

"What are you going to do now," he asked, voice trembling. Swanker could barely control his own panic. But he knew he must. He must think! "Look, calm down! Simpson said she was barely awake, didn't he?"

"Yes, then she went back to sleep."

"Did she recognise him?"

"He said he thought she spoke his name but he wasn't sure."

"And the doctors said she could have brain damage, amnesia?"

"Yes."

"Then with a bit of luck she won't recognise me, or she won't remember anything. If she does, then I'll just have to try to bluff my way out."

"I don't like it."

"Neither do I, you idiot," Swanker snarled, "but I don't see that I have much choice. And the sooner I go to see her the better."

That afternoon Harding and Swanker went to the hospital together but Dong would only allow them to see Jilly individually. Harding went in first. She was awake but didn't recognise him. It was awkward for him. He couldn't really jog her memory by asking if she remembered taking him to bed at her place for a bang-up nookie session. He could only speak to her in generalities and she soon tired of that and drifted back to sleep, confused. Dong later found that Harding's finger prints did not match those on the whisky bottle.

Shortly after Harding left Dong woke Jilly again, insisting gently that she meet just one more person. Fearfully Swanker walked into the room and although Jilly did not recognise him either, something deep in her brain was jolted by him. She found she couldn't look at this man and became mildly distressed after just a few minutes and Swanker had to leave.

He was sweating when he turned from the bed, because he now feared the worst. No, she hadn't recognised him but something about him had upset her, he had seen that. He had the feeling that her amnesia wasn't going to last much longer. He would have to kill her, there was no doubt about it. But how? In this hospital? She was too heavily guarded. Somehow he would have to contrive to get her out. And Simpson. He couldn't forget Simpson. He was now too close to her and, by association, too close to him. He would have to move fast. He turned from the bed, almost into General Dong's chest.

"It is distressing, yes major? Here, a drink perhaps?"

"Thank you." Swanker took the pro-offered glass of chilled water and drank it. The general found later that night that he had his matching set of finger prints. How best to use them was the next question.

The next morning Jilly had spoken Donkey's name a little clearer, and smiled weakly. Her grip on his hand was much firmer. But once again she had fallen asleep, after about twenty minutes. The doctors said they, too, had spoken to her but she appeared to remember only his name. They could not stimulate her like he obviously could. It was too early to tell yet, but they were beginning to think that any brain damage might not be severe, but there was almost certain to be some amnesia, maybe permanent, maybe not. Only time would tell but each day she should improve.

CHAPTER 26

Donkey looked at the huge pile of letters he had to answer and sighed. He had already written to Allison and his own family and it was late. He'd been sipping cans all night and was tired. Still, he had to catch up on his damned correspondence.

"If you want 'em you've got to write 'em," he sighed, picking up Gwen's postcard and smiling. It was the second or third time she had written to him. Most of his so-called friends had not written at all and most of the other letters he had to answer were from people who had written just the once — for Christmas.

Gwen, he decided, would get priority. And more to the point, his journalist mate from his pre-Army days wanted to know "what it is *really* like". Okay girl, if that's what you want, he thought, here it is, blood and guts included.

At about this stage of sobriety, which one with more fear of God in him than myself would describe as verging on the edges of drunkenness, I sit myself down on my ass (a disgusting American expression that I seem to have picked up) and begin an epistle that one day may equal in literary prominence one written by Good Ol' Charlie Brown to his Pencil Pal. It's a funny thing that. The Pencil Pal so very rarely writes to Charlie Brown. Perhaps the true story is that Brown hasn't any friends at all. However, as usual, Simpson philosophises and psychoanalyses when UTI (Under The Influence).

However, you wanted some info on Vietnam. Ok girl, I have some news for you and it's all bad. What I want to tell you now about this (excuse the expression and I'm sure you will be able to since widening your horizons) fucked-out country would take quite a few thousand words. Although you are a dear friend of mine, I have no intention of staying up until the wee small hours of the morning expressing my opinion of Vietnam to such length. I could shorten my description of the place to only a dozen words — - but I do not wish to offend sensibilities. After all, I am writing to a lady.

Excuse me while I crack anotheree. Ahh, that's better. There are two things to do in this town after you have been here as long as I have — without going completely around the bend — and I'm quite serious. The first is the most

attractive but also the most expensive. There are plenty of girls around who will relieve your inner tensions, so to speak. The second is to drink yourself stupid every night (which I'm proceeding to do tonight, most unsuccessfully though because I can still type with some small degree of accuracy). This may sound absurd to you but believe me, it's not. VD (which is more prominent and more virulent than any political party in this country) is a bad disease but twelve months on the grog can have just the same damaging effect in other ways. Some people combine the two, in a sort of compromise, usually end up with a load, get rid of it and go home to domestication — and, thank the Lord, civilisation.

You've no idea the different kinds of VD one can quite easily attain — and all for the reasonable price of twenty five dollars US!

When I return to Australia I propose to take you out to dinner one night and tell you all about this country. I'm afraid there is no other way to describe it to you. I feel it is important for you (just as it has been important for me, to a degree) to know about it as it has been to me to live it. Journalistically speaking, of course. However I shall have to be somewhat under the influence to give you any detail because, believe me, once I leave this place I want to forget it. Hate can go so far and without release, it must be put out of mind.

I'd be glad to tell you or any other genuinely interested person about this country but I ask you please — don't comment on my passionate hatred which I'm sure I'll be unable to conceal once I start.

Now to tell you a story. Before I was called up, the Star ran a letter from an Anti-Vietnam critic which appalled me. I told the boss I was going to answer the bastard and I did. It was very sarcastic and cynical but what it boiled down to was "if we don't fight them over there we'll have to fight them here". In the short span of twelve months, with practical experience, my ideas have changed radically.

I HATE Vietnamese. And believe me, there are very few soldiers from any Free World country fighting here who do not hate Vietnamese. A friend of mine said only the other day that he was disgusted by their 'passive acceptance' of the war. These were words for which I had been looking for some time. But it's not only this. Give the Vietnamese an inch and they'll take three thousand miles. Give them a gift 'for the poor, oppressed people of Vietnam' and they bow and scrape and say 'chau hom' (thank you). As soon as your back is turned they sell it to a black market dealer.

But what most upsets me (and many others) is that they are not prepared to help themselves. They've never had it so good. The stupid Yanks dole out every damn thing to them — only to see it appear on the black market the next day. I used to think that all these people needed was education. Oh no, they need more than that. They resemble the spoilt brat who is given everything he asks for and screams blue murder when refused the smallest wish or whim. The Yanks have been doling out everything for so long that this is typical of the Vietnamese. What do they call it in New Guinea? Cargo Cult, that's right!

Corruption is rife (right up to, and probably including, their president); integrity is non-existent; national pride is unheard of; God, I could go on and on. I hate to say it, I hate to think it, but have more than two hundred Australians lost their lives for nothing? Absolutely nothing? Sometimes you think that they and their families would have been more at peace had they been killed in a road crash at home — where they belong. Where we all belong.

In the naivete of my youth I didn't believe a man could look upon another human being and believe him not to be a human being. I believe it now. Vietnamese are human beings in physical nature only — otherwise they're shit. They hate us and we hate them. The only thing that stops them from killing us is our power of retaliation; the only thing that stops us from killing them is our own laws of humanity and democracy. It would give me the greatest pleasure, not to kill one of the bastards, but hundreds of them.

The only thing that stops me is a murder charge — preferred by my own country.

These are strong words, I know, but sincere. I don't expect you to believe them or understand them. It is enough for me to know what I feel, not what others, who stand behind pulpits and lecterns and who have never been here, say and feel. And I can tell you that protest groups throughout the world against the Vietnam war are a lot of crap. How the hell do they know? Feel? Have they hands-on experience of dealing with Vietnamese, fighting for them, living with them, eating their shit food, being taken down by them, suffering their filth, complacency or watching them shit quite openly in the streets of a capital city? No. They work on political angles which for centuries have killed millions of men.

I see reports come through of our blokes killed — he's just another number, another digit, another nothing. You ask a bloke who's been in the

field, you ask him why his best mate was killed. He'll say because a fucking VC shot him — with a bullet. Blew his head off. . . blew both his legs off so he bled to death. . . shot him through the neck so you could see the bloke's face crying out for help, shit-scared, before freezing into death, eyes and mouth open, frozen in a distinct question mark — WHY? FOR WHAT?

The only answer an infantryman can give you is that he fought and died for his country because this is what has been drummed into his stupid bloody brain, all our brains. It's simply not true.

But I'm getting a bit carried away, something which I didn't mean to do. But I suppose, under the influence of a stimulant, all my passions have come out at once. Perhaps it is good to get it off my chest. In vino veritas. But I will never remove it from my mind.

I must bid you bye bye now because I'm typing slower and slower, making more and more mistakes and as it is 11.40 pm and fast approaching midnight, I need my rest badly.

All my love, Brian.

He left the last page of the letter in his typewriter and collapsed into bed, dog tired. He'd fix the envelope in the morning.

He woke early and re-read the letter as he was dressing. "Mmmm," he said to himself, "I wonder if it's a bit heavy?"

"Eh?" said Ned.

"This letter I wrote last night to one of my former journalist colleagues. She asked me for the guts and I've given it to her all right. I'm just wondering now though, in the sober light of day, if I come on a bit strong."

"Well, give me a look. I'll soon tell you."

Donkey handed the letter over and went to have a shower and shave. When he came back Ned was sitting on his bed, staring into space, the letter held limply in his right hand.

"What do you think?" asked Donkey.

Ned looked up, grim-faced. He got up from his bed and turned away from Donkey, reaching for his rifle.

"You couldn't have put it better." He reached for the doorknob and turned back to Donkey. "Mate, I wish I could write like that." He walked out, almost twelve months of service in Vietnam weighing heavily on his thin, child-like shoulders.

Donkey was startled. He saw that the letter had hit Ned hard, cracked the shell that he'd built around himself. Happy-go-lucky Ned, the guy voted most

likely to survive. Donkey had always thought that Ned had simply taken Vietnam in his stride; that his tough childhood had prepared him better than others for the war. He was shocked to see that he was wrong.

And what about me, he wondered. Do I really “hate” Vietnamese? Has this experience taught me not only the deepest meaning of the word but also how to apply it? If I have lost respect for the Vietnamese as people, what else has been destroyed? Me too? I have changed, that was inevitable, but for the better or worse? Yes, he conceded, I have learned to hate, the war has taught me well. It has scarred my soul, but how badly, permanently? Can I throw this off when I get home, awake from this bad dream?

Who am I now? I came for the experience, to broaden my horizons, and certainly did that. Will I learn from it and pass on, or have another can, get pissed and pass out? Am I going home a pisspot, a drunk? A contributor or a leech? Poisoned like a baited dingo on the wrong side of the fence? Blind and brain-diseased like a myxo rabbit?

We have all been conned, some even killed, no doubt about that. But we don’t want to *believe* that, we *can’t* believe that! Even *face*it. Or it’s all for nought. Is that where the real hate comes from, or where it’s aimed? Bitterness and hate. Bloody soul destroying. Confusing. What a joke, really. Humor so black it could — and does — kill. He grimaced. *Hey, cut it out, this is so funny it’s killing me!*

Donkey folded the six-page letter, slipped it into his pocket and ran down to catch the bus. He read and re-read the letter. The questions kept coming back but he knew, deep down, he didn’t want to face them, let alone attempt to find the answer. *In vino veritas.* Really? That prospect frightened him, a deep fear stopping him addressing an envelope, posting it. "Why is a piece of string?" his grandfather used to ask him. "That doesn't make sense," he'd reply. His grandfather would simply say "Think about it."

But it was too hard. Donkey gave up thinking. And he never posted the letter.

CHAPTER 27

It was time to move. Jilly had shown marked improvement. Her amnesia was still causing some concern although she had recognised Simpson on his last visit. He cleared the guards from her hospital room and began to lead her gently through her past, her family, schooling, friends (particularly himself), her training in languages, her job with the Australians as an interpreter. Once her memory was jogged she began to pick up things quickly, to recall bits and pieces of her past but it was still a jigsaw. Many pieces were there but few fitted. She began to become confused again, to tire, there was too much to absorb.

"Just a little more, Mai Li," the general encouraged. "When you were working for the Australians you began with Major Swanker in the Intelligence section."

"Yes," she grimaced tentatively, "Perhaps I remember, vaguely."

"You became very friendly with him."

"Yes?"

"In fact you became lovers."

Mai Li reddened, her eyebrows lowered, questioning, struggling with her recollections. "We did?"

"You do not remember?"

"No . . . I . . . " She stopped, thinking for a minute. Then she brightened. "Two-Bob?"

"Yes, that's right! Except now they call him Three-Bob."

Her face darkened as slowly her mind repainted its picture of Swanker, recalling his sexual perversions. "He Numbah Ten," she muttered. She gasped, as another memory slammed into place. "I try bomb him!"

"Yes, you did. What else?"

"He bad man. I . . . yes, there . . . is . . . something." She creased her brow again, thinking deeply, closed her eyes. Then her eyes flashed open and her hands flew to her mouth, stifling a strangled gasp which stuck in her throat. "He try kill me. He do this to . . . *me!*"

"Yes."

The horroric memory flooded back, so real that she twisted and turned, as if trying to avoid the blows, raising her arms to protect her head, screaming in terror. The guards rushed into her room, followed by the doctors. Quickly

they sedated her and soon she slept.

General Dong sighed. He looked down at his disfigured, drugged Mata Hari. She had collapsed just one question too soon. When she wakes, I will know, he promised himself. I will know who is this Simpson.

That was one question. There were still others, like what was Cowboy Cassidy’s ultra secret operation? Why had not Natasha been able to find out more about it? Suddenly the American had spurned her, she had said, pushed off her advances. Time was running out.

***

Ned's time was finally up. He'd done his twelve months and he'd be on the next plane home. He demanded that Donkey give him a night on the town, chauffeur driven, in the Jeep, to the best knockshops in the city.

The last thing either of them needed was another load so Donkey decided the best thing to do would be to tag along and look after the little bastard.

Whenever Ned threw himself into the clutches of a painted, tainted doll Donkey dragged him out of the bar. Three times Ned was hauled away by the ear squealing in protest. Donkey knew he'd have to find a bar full of uglies. But Ned had driven to the Street of Bars, Tu Do Street, where the girls were the best in town, and to find an ugly was nigh on impossible.

When Ned produced his wallet at the fourth bar Donkey pinched it.

"Hey!" protested Ned, "what are you doing?"

"Looking after me mate. If you want to spend money mate, you've got to get it out of me first."

"Aww, come on Donkey, it's my bloody money!"

"No, tonight you're not going to get us in the shit. You're going home and you're not carrying a load with you."

"I just want to have a little fun!"

"You can have as much fun as you like, but you're not dippin' the wick in any dirty little hole."

Ned's answer was cut off by four American GIs. "Scuse me, you guys Orstrayliens?" one asked.

If they'd been asked that once . . . Donkey and Ned both looked quizzically at their “Australia” shoulder flashes — and thought they’d try the stories one more time, both realising it would be the last.

The Americans insisted on buying the Coke and ice for the whisky. They were enthralled by the koala, the goanna and the platypus; the Queensland

death adder, only 12 inches long, that could travel at thirty miles an hour across the ground and leap ten feet in the air. That sure beat hell out of their rattlesnake. Then there was the bunyip.

"Bunyip?"

"Yep, the real king of our wild animals, if you can call it an animal . . ."

The GIs appeared amazed at the Wonders of the World Down Under.

“An' to think ah was gunna go there on R&R. You jest changed ma mind. Hell, ah'm changin' to Pee-nang."

"No Kings Bloody Cross for me now, man," said one of the others. They were the first words this guy had spoken throughout the long conversation. His bar girl had kept him extremely busy, Donkey had thought. Now his warning antenna was up.

"You've heard of Kings Bloody Cross then have you?"

"Man," said the GI looking up at Donkey and grinning broadly, "not only has we heard of it, we bin there!"

Donkey and Ned had been had and there was no escape. They were wedged in on the ends of the stool seat against the wall. I wonder what they'll do to us when they stop laughing, Donkey moaned to himself. It had to happen eventually, he thought. And, once again, it was bloody Ned's fault. Christ, hung on our own petard! Think quick, mate, if you want to get out of this one.

But suddenly he realised the GIs were genuinely amused. The Australians ran with the enemy, began laughing too.

"Hooo!" hooted the talkative GI, "them stories! They's about the best versions we ever heard!"

"Hey, sorry about that you guys. Just havin' a bit of fun," apologised Donkey.

"Don't apologise, man. Hell, that was fun! An' you should have seen your faces when Jim mentioned Kings Bloody Cross. Hooooo!"

"Hey," grinned Donkey, relieved. "You guys are all right. But if we all don't get back to our billets pretty damn quick we're going to get our arses shot off." He lifted his watch into plain view. It was nine fifty-five, five minutes before curfew. "Where you guys staying?"

"The Capitol."

"Right. Come on, we'll give you a ride."

They all piled out of the bar and into the Jeep. Ned jammed the vehicle into gear and sped off towards the Capitol, the Americans hooting wildly in a

tangled mess in the back, as traffic suddenly thinned and disappeared from the now forbidden streets.

They might have got away with being out after curfew had they not been ya-hooing but inevitably their noise attracted the attention of two white-helmeted American MPs in a similar vehicle. As Ned took a corner too fast, almost tipping everyone out on to the road, they gave chase.

One of the Americans was first to notice the red flashing light. "Shit man, MPs!"

Ned glanced in his rearview mirror. "Fuck 'em!" he snarled. "Hang on!" No-one was going to book him and stop him going home on that next plane. He pushed the Jeep into another right turn, squealing the skinny tyres, slamming the gearbox down to second and roaring down a narrow side street.

The MPs saw him go and turned on their siren.

Donkey swore. "You fuckin' idiot, what are you doing?"

"Don't worry, we'll lose 'em." He turned to the back. “Right you blokes, next corner, one of you bail out!"

The MPs didn't know whether to stop and pick up the body which had apparently bounced out of the Jeep or not. When they saw it get to its feet gingerly and then begin running they decided to continue pursuing the Jeep. But their indecision had given Ned an added fifty yards. At the next three corners the other Gis jumped, fell and ran, the MPs now only 100 yards behind. Ned headed for the Canberra. Donkey gritted his teeth and just hung on. There was no way they would get away with this one.

Suddenly there was a screech of tyres to their right and another Jeep roared out of a small side street, horn blaring loudly. It swung dangerously across in front of them, skidding on two wheels and swerved crazily down the street the way they had come, straight into the path of the MPs, the driver screaming “Yahoooo!” The gap between the two vehicles closed astonishingly quickly, Donkey thought, gritting his teeth for the inevitable accident. But at the last moment the MPs chickened out, swinging hard left away from the madman bearing down on them, hand still pressed to his horn. The MPs sideswiped a row of shops, mangling street-front steel mesh security grilles before being thrown on to the roadway in a tangled heap.

“Holy shit!” Ned exclaimed, “did you see that! What a bloody idiot.”

“That idiot just saved our arse! Did you see the scarf?”

“Jansen?”

“Yep, again.”

“Crazy bastard,” Ned grinned, “but right now I love him!”

He slammed the Jeep into a narrow alley, screeching to a stop fifty yards from the corner. He jumped out, running. "Car-mon!" he screamed to Donkey. Suddenly Donkey recognised where they were. The alley was only about one hundred yards from the Canberra. Maybe they could make it before the MPs picked themselves up.

They ran for the Canberra's front gate but as they approached, the large belly of Kevin Schutt loomed into view.

"What the fuck's goin . . ." he began. Ned cut him off. "Nothin! You haven't seen us! Get back inside!" He and Donkey raced past him, up the stairs and into their room.

Schutt shook his head. The little bastard's in trouble again and he's only got a couple of days to go. Unbelievable! What the hell's he done this time? He had only a few moments to wonder as the MPs, in determined pursuit, blundered up to the Canberra's now closed Judas gate.

"What's going' on?" Schutt repeated.

"You see two guys, two Orstrayliens, come runnin' round here man!"

"Nope."

The MPs looked at him in astonishment. "You *ain't?* Just now, man!"

"By the look of you guys, you’ve got a real problem. How come you’re in such a disgraceful state?" Schutt asked, eyeing their ripped and dirty uniforms.

"They out after curfew, driving' a Jeep like madmen, tearing up the town, man, that's what. Then this other crazy, an’ Ah mean crayyyy-zeeeee, damn near killed us all. You know anythin’ bout dat?”

"Nobody here's got a Jeep."

"Not now, man. One of em's back there in that alley."

Schutt shrugged his shoulders. "None of my business."

The Americans began to get angry. "You fuckin' blind man?"

"Don't come that bullshit with me fella," Schutt warned menacingly. "I've got a hotel to guard, now fuck off!"

Three stories above, on their balcony, Ned and Donkey listened anxiously, still breathing hard.

There was a moment of silence, then the second MP spoke. "C'mon man, what the hell, we go report back, take the Jeep." He turned to Schutt. "And from now on, every Arzzie in this fuckin' town cops MP shit, man, you tell 'em that. You guys fart man, you all in deep shit. You hear?" They turned and

walked back the way they had come, bloodied, bedraggled and beaten.

"Phew!" breathed Ned. "That was close. And it looks as though we've lost the Jeep. Thank God old Kev is guard sergeant tonight although it'll cost me a few beers tomorrow."

"So it should you crazy bastard," hissed Donkey, still trembling. "Jesus! Will I be glad to see your fuckin' back! Nothin' but trouble, you've always been trouble! And what do I care about the fuckin' Jeep? They can have it."

Ned grinned and grabbed two cans of VB from the fridge. "Made me a lot of money that Jeep, gave me mobility and nobility. I was very fond of that ve-hick-el. Ah well. It's the end of the road for me anyway, so what the hell. Now where's the church key?" he wondered, casting around. He found it under the bed, popped the cans open and handed one to Donkey. "Up the old red rooster?" he asked mischievously, a cheeky grin begging forgiveness. Donkey couldn't help but laugh.

"I'll miss you, you little prick." He raised his can in salute and finished off the salutation. "More piss," he sighed resignedly and they drank. Donkey had often wondered how much money Ned had made over the year. He asked.

"Well, I'll be a millionaire when I leave, compared to most blokes."

"Oh yeah, and how are you going to get the money out? Real money?"

"In de bizinezz, dere are vays, alvays vays," he mimicked.

"And if there aren't you'll invent them . . ."

"Of course!"

"You're bloody hopeless!"

"Unt headink for ze first milliona dolla!"

***

Ned's departure left Donkey in a state of constant depression. He had been a great mate and they had had some good times together. His new room mate was the Padre's replacement, Private Ian McLean, who wasn't a bad sort of bloke but really he and Donkey were poles apart. He had moved into Donkey's room when Ned left. At the time Donkey didn't think it was such a great idea to both live and work with someone. He'd found that out earlier when he shared the room with the Padre. But he thought, what the hell, I haven't got long to go, and McLean was so insistent that it was a good idea. Besides he'd bought Ned's share in the fridge.

But Donkey soon tired of him. McLean had been in Vietnam only two

months, Donkey had been in country more than ten. At twenty he was just short of three years younger than Donkey. He was like a little puppy, bouncing everywhere, always wanting to play. Donkey felt like an old dog: all he wanted to do was lay down, mope around. "Been there, done that" he'd say every time his room mate wanted Donkey to go with him on the town. He'd had enough. All he wanted was out.

He resolved that each night, no matter what happened during the day, he would carefully mark another day gone on his RTA calendar, another painfully slow twenty four hours closer to home. He resolved to do as little as possible at work, preferring to dream; the delights of the City of Sin no longer held any attraction so he would spend his evenings in his room writing letters, doing a little shorthand study and taping music.

While in Hong Kong he had bought a cassette tape recorder with separate twin speakers. He would borrow tapes and records and with the aid of a borrowed record player or tape recorder, which he'd link to his own, he'd spend hours building a music library from Bach to the Beatles. He ambitiously aimed to tape more than 100 hours of musical scores from Broadway hits, Leonard Bernstein classics, the soul of Ray Charles, Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin; the plunkety-plunk of Chet Atkins and Floyd Kramer on piano; the brass of Sergio Mendes, Trini Lopez; polite jazz and big band sounds from nondescript artists; Dean Martin, Bert Bacharach, Barbra Streisand, Blood Sweat and Tears, the Lovin' Spoonful, The Turtles, Gary Puckett, Paul Mauriat, Petula Clark, the Animals.

And, of course, the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix. There was no Rolling Stones. He didn't like the Stones. He found "no satisfaction" in the screechings of Jagger. While he listened to Dylan preaching peaceful revolution he couldn't quite bring himself to wear a flower in his hair. He wondered if that, indeed, was the world to which he would return. Peace baby? No way . . .

That's what he planned to do until he got his ticket to ride. No more trouble. It would be easy enough, after all, Ned had gone home.

There was only Jilly . . .

His thoughts were interrupted by Errington barging through the door of his room with a couple of cans of VB in his hand. “Hey Donk, can I swap these for a coupla coldies old mate?”

“Yeah, these’s some in the fridge, top shelf. Others will be too warm, I’ve just put ‘em in.”

“Thanks mate.”

“Just don’t tell every other bastard. If Ned was still here he’d charge you. By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask you. I met a bird called Natasha the other day. Says she’s a friend of yours.”

“Yes, she works with Dong. His Aide.” He grinned guiltily. “A very special friend of mine actually.”

“Ah, I see. How come you haven’t told me about her before?”

Errington shrugged. “I dunno. The Noggie Lover syndrome I suppose. Anyway, what’s your interest?”

“I met her at the airport. I thought she was, ah, someone else.” He caught himself just in time. He didn’t want to disillusion Errington by telling him about his girlfriend’s moonlighting. He was still absolutely convinced she was Little Flower, but Errington’s admission made it damned difficult now to prove it. “She jumped into a big black limo with Cowboy Cassidy.”

“Yeah, she’s a member of Dong’s staff but he loaned her to the Cowboy as a liaison officer.”

“Ohh,” was all Donkey could manage in reply.

***

Dong found Mai Li strangely reluctant to discuss Simpson with him. He had to dig patiently for some time before he discovered the truth. He wondered whether it was still shock, still amnesia, or something else. But as he led her on, more and more information came to light. And the more she told, the more shocked he became.

Amazing, audacious plans! Impossible, to kill *both* Ho and Ky. Never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined anything so radical as what was proposed, through Operation Santa Claus, by the Americans and Australians. Because surely the Americans must be involved. This must be Cassidy’s ultra secret plan! Did President Thieu know about this? Surely not, or he would not have engineered his own plan, with his (Dong’s) assistance, to finally rid himself once and for all of Ky, the thorn which had wriggled in his side for so many years, every time he moved. But why has Cassidy not told him about it, even involved him? How did Simpson plan to get close enough to Ky to assassinate him? But then, Ho Chi Minh was still ill, wasn’t he, after Simpson had gone north? Ahhh, he admonished himself, I’m beginning to believe all this nonsense! but what if . . .

And then it occurred to him. The party! General Melville-Smith was due to leave Vietnam the following week and General Dong had organised a

farewell party for him, in this very building. Vice President Ky, as a mark of respect and gratitude to the Australians for their support, had promised to attend. The Australian protocol officer, Captain Brown, had sent him a list of guests they had invited to the function, at his invitation. Checking the list, he found B. Simpson, Cpl, Aust. PR. Except for Corporal Harding, the general's secretary, every other invitee was a high ranking Australian officer. Now why, wondered Dong, would a general invite a lowly corporal to such a party?

As far as Dong and Mai Li could tell, Cassidy and Melville-Smith did not suspect his duplicity. At least he was safe for the time being. So his first priority now must be Ky. Should he inform him of the foreigners' plans or just let events take their course? If Ky's time had come, if Simpson was the agent of his destruction, who was he to interfere? Was it time for him to make his move to the Presidential Palace? Was this opportunity presenting itself? One way or the other, he decided, he would soon be Vice President of South Vietnam, General of all the armies. After that it was only a matter of time before Thieu was "persuaded" to face reality. He smiled to himself. The man who clung so desperately to power, who played politics so brilliantly within his own government, was slowly cutting his own throat. For every ounce of heroin which his runners brought from the Golden Triangle and sold to American soldiers was injecting poison into his own backbone. And every dollar he earned from its sale brought with it an even more fatal addiction than the poppy seed which spawned it.

It had all been so very carefully planned. There would be apparent concessions made in Paris, talk of a ceasefire, a face-saving deal so the Americans could have the "withdrawal with honor" Kissinger and Nixon so desperately wanted, more talk of co-operation and ever-lasting peace. But once the Americans were gone the reality would be very different. And he would go home to Hanoi a hero second only to Ho Chi Minh himself.

He bled Mai Li dry. There was nothing left. She had recalled everything, told him everything. And she felt very uneasy about it. Her feelings for Donkey had returned, although she now realised any future she might have imagined between the two of them had disappeared with her beauty. But that didn't, couldn't change her heart. She tried to think it through, put the remaining pieces of the jigsaw into place, because she knew there were still some missing, and others which just didn't fit, but her mind refused, demanding sleep.

***

"Tonight," insisted Captain Brown, "we'll forget about rank fellas. After all, I'm probably only a couple of years older than you blokes anyway. The name's Ron."

"It is too," said Donkey with some surprise. "You know, I'd completely forgotten that sir."

"Ron."

"Ron! Of course! Old habits dying hard. Sorry 'bout dat."

"Beers?"

"Ta."

They were in the kitchen in the general's house. Brown had invited Harding and Donkey for dinner, just for old time's sake and because they were all not far off going their separate ways. Other Ranks, apparently, didn't rate the full dining room treatment. Still, Donkey mused, it's better than eating out in the bloody garage as he had done during his stint on guard duty here a few months back. It was a big kitchen with a table in the centre large enough to seat eight people. The Vietnamese cook used it to prepare his food. The general and his staff would never go short of booze, either, Donkey noted. The two grog fridges also were enormous. Captain Brown grabbed three cans of VB, opened them and passed them around. He raised his and saluted.

"Here's cheers!"

"And up the old red rooster . . ." Harding.

"More piss." Donkey.

"Gentlemen," said the captain with a sense of due military mess ceremony, "we have tonight a meal that your mothers would be proud to serve."

"Smells like a roast," noted Donkey.

"Indeed it is. Roast beef, roast potatoes, mint peas, beans and cauliflower . . . with, gentlemen, real Gravox."

"Real gravy?" said Harding, his eyes opening wide, "not that watery American shit?"

"Gravox, gentlemen. But first . . ." Captain Brown put his can down and ceremoniously flipped a tea towel covering a huge plate.

"Have a go at that! Prawns! And big buggers, too. Tigers." Donkey was most impressed. Harding, being from Sydney, was staggered.

"Where did you get those?"

"I wouldn't dare to presume to ask Sergeant May where he procures the general's supplies. Rest assured gentlemen, it's always of the highest quality." He picked up the plate and passed it to the two corporals. Donkey picked up a prawn and while shelling it, began singing softly:

Drink it up, drink it up,
Come and have a bloody beer and prawns with me.
If you want to throw your voice,
Then you've only got one choice,
Come and chunder in the old Pacific sea.

Harding laughed. "Long time since I've heard that."

"Won't be long mate and I'll be down on the beach round a fire singing it to my heart's content."

"Why do you want to go home to mummy?" chipped in the captain, "You bloody Nashos don't know when you're on a good thing." He was stirring and got the response he expected. Both Donkey and Harding spluttered into their beers. Harding came up for air first.

"Ron, that is the most insane thing I think I've ever heard. But coming from someone who's extended, it really shouldn't surprise me."

Donkey's jaw dropped. "He's extended?"

"For another six months." Brown was grinning. "They wouldn't let me sign on for another twelve."

"Not only that," broke in Harding, "but instead of staying in the nice cushy job he's got now as aide to COMAFV . . ."

"There's a new general coming in you know," Brown broke in.

". . . and you know very well you could have stayed on as aide to him as well. Anyway Donkey, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted by a lifer, he applied to go back to Battalion and got it."

"What?" said Donkey, incredulous. "You volunteered to go bush again? You got shot in the arse or something last time you were in the boonies and you want to go back?"

"So I'm a lifer. I'm stupid. And I wasn't shot in the arse. It was a frag . . ."

"You've still got a scar on your arse."

"And about four places on my back. So don't go around telling people I got shot up the arse. It has connotations of cowardice, suggestions that I had my back to the enemy."

"You could always say you were giving Charlie a brown-eye."

Harding laughed. Brown thought Donkey's joke was distinctly unfunny.

"Smart bastard," he snapped. "I was lying flat on my face shooting shit out of a VC ambush . . ."

"Or that you were trying to fart in Charlie's face and it back-fired . . ."

"You bloody Nashos just don't understand, do you . . ."

"No. Don't want to either. Sanity's far preferable."

Brown changed the subject, turning to Nguyen, the cook. "How's the beef?"

"Soon, soon," said the Vietnamese, grinning gold and betel nut black.

"God, would you look at those teeth!" whispered Harding. "Gold from ear'ole to ear'ole!"

"Just as well Ned never met him. He would have had that lot out and convinced the bloke he was doing him a favor."

The roast beef was delicious. Donkey could eat less than half the food on his plate and stared morosely at it. It looked as though it had hardly been touched.

"Don't like it?" asked Brown.

"No, it's not that. It's bloody magnificent. It's just that I can't seem to eat any more. Ever since I got here I have been eating less and less every day and now I can’t stomach much at all. Drives me crazy, especially when you get good tucker like this. God knows what Mum's going to say when I get home. I'll drive her mad pushing food around like this. I reckon my stomach's shrunk to nothing." He pushed his plate away, picked up his can and grinned. "Thank God there's nourishment in this!" He took a big swallow. "Anyhow Ron, what were you saying?"

They all grinned at that and Brown continued his interrupted story of how he was wounded.

"And now you're like a pig in shit because you're going back into that same bush to get shot up some more," Harding commented.

"I was unlucky last time."

"There's been a few hundred Aussies who were a hell of a lot unluckier than you." Donkey.

"Yep, right. The luck of the draw."

"The luck of the draw? It's as simple as that, is it? Some poor bastard gets blown away and you put it down to the luck of the draw. Roll up, roll up! Buy your unlucky Tatts ticket here!"

"That's the reality, not the morality."

"You certainly can't argue with the reality of the bodycount, true," said

Harding bitterly, "but you can argue about the morality — the why and what for . . ."

"And it won't get you anywhere."

"Ah ha! Then what's the point of the whole bloody exercise? Or is it just that? A bloody exercise, you know, practice makes perfect, the Army must have live exercises to make it an efficient, effective, fighting force, all that crap."

"I'm not going to argue politics."

"Why the hell not? Among those many oaths that I'm sure you took at Duntroon, was there one which said 'Thou shalt not think?"

"Don't be bloody ridiculous! Look, I'm a professional soldier. I'm paid to fight, to defend my country . . ."

"Ah ha!"

"No, wait, I know what you're going to say but just hear me out. Yes, to defend my country, my government, even if that means fighting ten thousand miles away from home. If my government says 'go' I go. I obey orders." He pointed a finger at Harding and Donkey. "The same orders you blokes are also following right now!"

"Sure, sure, but you're getting off the point," said Harding. "We were all suckered into believing the bullshit about the 'Yellow Peril' and 'If you don't fight them there you'll fight them here one day'. We all believed we were fighting for the freedom of a democratic, loving people. And if the attitude of the Nogs themselves was more positive we might still believe it. But they're just making hay between the napalm drops! The Yanks are dumping an enormous cargo cult right into their laps and they're loving it."

"That's a gross over-simplification."

"Maybe it is," argued Donkey, "and Bob's wandering off the point too. The point is this: the South Vietnamese don't want to fight. So what the bloody hell are we doing here? The people back home don't want us here, we don't want to be here, so what's the bloody point?"

Brown leaned back in his chair and looked at the two Nashos.

"You blokes are all mixed up, aren't you."

"And you're not, I suppose."

"No. I just follow orders. Look! You can argue — as we said before — until you're black and blue in the face about this and you'll get exactly nowhere. The reality is we're here and we've got a job to do. Whether we like it or not is completely irrelevant. If we had a choice in the matter there's

probably not one Allied soldier who wouldn't pack up and go home, including us lifers. And that's something that crazy fringe element back home doesn't seem to understand."

"Fringe element? You call a couple of hundred thousand out on the streets a fringe element?"

"Ah, who knows," said Harding. "The majority in Australia are probably just as bloody well confused as what we are. I think they're embarrassed about it all. They just want to forget it and hope it goes away. But what really pisses me off are those bastards running around openly backing the North — getting back to your reality as you put it Ron — our enemies, the enemy of our country, the bastards who are killing their own countrymen! How can they do that! How can they run around waving NVA flags and chanting 'Ho Chi Minh' when their own mates are being wasted by that flag and by that man?"

"That's right!" agreed Donkey. "Don't they realise we've got no choice in the matter? How can they kick us in the guts like that?"

"A small, lunatic fringe," argued Brown.

"Growing, by all accounts, every day."

Harding was getting angry. “You know I wouldn't mind so much if these people marched up and down and protested for an end to the war or to stop our involvement in it, if at the same time they said to us, 'look fellas, don't take it personally. We don't like the war, we don't think you blokes should be there but as long as you are we're right behind you all the way, as fellow Australians. We appreciate that you have been given a job to do, a job you hate and we're doing our level best to get you out, to back you. In the meantime, good on you, Digger!' But openly supporting the enemy is kicking us in the guts."

Donkey shook his head in despair. "Imagine what would have happened during World War Two if some bastard had marched down Bourke St or Pitt St in jackboots carrying a huge picture of Hitler and a swastika flag? They would have been hung for fucking treason! And these bastards are doing exactly the same!"

"No point doin' the nana," said Brown.

"It makes you feel so bloody helpless, frustrated, pissed off . . ." Donkey was lost for words momentarily. "because there's just fuck-all we can do about it."

"Forget about it. It's about time I organised a car to get you blokes back."

Brown.

"Forget it, yeah. That's about all we can do. And I'll tell you what, when I get home that's all I want to do too. Forget the whole fucking mess." Harding.

"That'll please the RSL." Donkey.

"What do you mean? They're about the only bastards with us."

"Well they'll have to change their motto if they adopt your attitude."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, nine o'clock every night, up they get on wobbly pins standing as straight as a dozen beers will allow them, and out trots the parrot and . . ." Donkey was trying to get to his own feet. He finally made it with a stagger. "Hey, I'm a bit molly meself!" he chuckled. "Jeez, how many tins have we had?"

"Book-oo!"

"Must have, anyway . . . what was I saying? I've forgotten!"

"Lest We Forget?" volunteered Harding, who was also worming his way upright.

"Yeah! That's it! No, I was gunna say, 'Best We Forget'. Yep, that's it. Best We Forget."

"I'll drink to that!" said Harding. "That's what I was tryin' to say." He pulled himself erect, swaying, and saluted clumsily.

"Best We Forget. An' up the old red rooster!"

"More piss!" answered Donkey, falling over his chair. Harding leaned over him, swaying dangerously, hooting loudly.

"Come on you crazy Nasho bastards, you've got to go home," grinned Brown. "You're out after curfew and in the shit, but you can't say I didn't look after my mates. I've got Colonel Bradshaw's car waiting. Come on."

"One for the road!" insisted Donkey.

"Haven't you blokes had enough tonight?"

"You heard what the man said," stumbled Harding. "We want one more can of the general's two-star piss for the road. It's a long trip. Ha ha!"

"Anything to get you drunks out of here!" Brown handed over the cans and lead the stumbling figures out to the waiting black, air-conditioned Ford limousine.

"Can you pour these piss-pots out at the Canberra please sergeant?" Brown said to the driver, who was staring in astonishment at the two corporals. Many's the time he had taken pissed senior officers and dignitaries home from here, but two corporals? He couldn't believe it. He shrugged and drove

away, his two charges yahooing in the back seat.

Donkey and Harding staggered into the Canberra waving their cans.

"What the bloody hell's going on here?" The guard sergeant was staggered. Two corporals, chauffeur-driven home in a colonel's staff car!

"It's all right sarge," shouted the chauffeur, "they've been on the piss at the general's house."

"At the gen . . ." The sergeant was lost for words. "This fucking place gets crazier and crazier every day."

"Right on sarge, right on!" slurred Donkey holding up his can. "This here's two-star piss. Bloody lovely!"

Harding put a comforting hand on the sergeant's arm. "Don't let it get ya sarge, it's bigger than all of us. Jus' forget it."

"Yep," chipped in Donkey, "Best We Forget."

***

Donkey was gently nursing a hangover when Harding burst into his office the following morning.

"Hey Donkey, back to earth fella!" he bellowed, "you and I are going to a party tonight."

Donkey grimaced. "Not so loud Whiz, and no way, been there done that."

"This one, me old china, you can't knock back." He handed Donkey an official looking card. "It's a farewell party for General Melville-Smith being thrown by one of the Noggie generals downstairs."

"Ah well, that's different. But how come I rate an invite to a do like that, me a baggy-arse private cum temporary corporal?"

"Big Al put you on the list himself. Actually, you'd better not broadcast it, but you're the only one from PR on the list."

"What! Didn't the Tortoise get an invite? I would have thought he'd be an automatic choice, Army protocol being what it is."

"Nope."

"Well, how about that! I couldn't have done such a bad job when I was with him after all. Fancy him remembering for all this time. I suppose I'd better front."

"You don't knock back Royal Command Performance invites, mate."

"Will you and I be the only ORs?"

"Yep, but I don't think we'll feel out of place."

"Right, I'll be there with bells on."

It was one hell of a party. Spit-roasted sides of beef, a full band, sexy

Noggie dancing girls and grog laid on. The Vietnamese were sending Big Al home in style.

The dancers began in traditional costume for traditional dance. It was very good. When they stripped to western bikinis, gyrated and pranced, eyes began popping.

"God, that's enough to drive you out of your mind." It was Captain Brown. He had sidled up behind Donkey and Harding.

"Especially when you're as short as I am," boasted Donkey. "But I wish I was as short as the general."

"Yes, he's got a week to go and hates the very thought of it."

"Lifer. Hopeless. Fancy wanting to stay here! Fancy trying to make something of this fucked-out country, it's absolutely fuckin' hopeless. He ought to have enough brains to see that."

Brown feigned shock. "Be careful of the company in which you say those sorts of things, Donkey. Loose tongues and all that," he warned.

Donkey guffawed. "Bullshit! Loose tongues . . . I don't give a shit. I've only got a few months left in this man's fucked-out Army and then they can jam it up their arse."

"Hear, hear to that!" added Harding. He and Donkey raised their glasses in salute. "More piss!" they replied quietly, diplomatically, in the star-studded throng. As Brown turned and left them, to attend Big Al, their attention snapped back to the dancing girls.

"He's not a bad sort of bloke really, for an officer, is he," commented Donkey, eyes fixed on thrusting crotches and bouncing boobs.

"Considering that he's a lifer as well."

"With him I don't mind that so much. I mean he was stupid from the start. He actually joined the Army of his own free will. If that's what he wants, he can have it. The blokes who really drive me crazy are the Nashos gone wrong, the blokes who go through the officers' knife and fork course, get one pip and then think they're God. And then extend beyond their two years! Now that's just plain crazy. Do you know that the guy who had Brown's job before him was one of those crazy bastards? I only knew him for a few weeks. Do you know why he signed on? So he could go to SAS! *SAS!* How loony is that?"

"Did he make it?"

"Dunno. Who cares? He was mad enough to make it, would have topped the class in the Crazy Test. Fair dinkum, have you ever met any of those

blokes?"

"No, but I've heard a lot about them."

"Every story's true. They don't shoot Charlie, they frighten the poor bastard to death by grinning at him." Suddenly he was distracted by one of the dancers who was gyrating and thrusting hungry hips at her audience. "God, look at that sheila up there now! Just have a look at that!"

"She's driving me crazy!"

"And everyone else."

"What's more, the bloody cock-teasing bitch knows it too."

"Fifty four and a wakey," moaned Donkey. "How the hell am I going to wait that long?"

Donkey noticed that Vice President Ky, in moving through the crowd speaking to people, was coming closer to he and Harding who he nudged. "He's only a little bastard, isn't he."

"He is a Nog remember," Harding whispered.

It was hot in the building's auditorium where the party was being held. Too many people in here, Donkey thought as he reached into his pocket for a handkerchief to wipe his brow. He hadn’t noticed the tightening circle of Vietnamese officers surrounding he and Harding, the Vietnamese vice president virtually at their elbow, the centre of the close, sweating throng.

General Dong saw Harding and Donkey looking at Ky and whispering. Then he saw Simpson's hand go to a pocket. He nodded.

The assassin pushed roughly between Donkey and Harding and fired two quick shots into Ky's chest. In almost the same instant he turned to his right, grabbed Harding's right hand and thrust the handgun, a Browning 9mm, standard issue to Australian officers, into it. Nobody outside the tight little circle saw a thing.

Before Simpson and Harding knew what had happened they were face down on the tiled floor, arms and legs spread, a foot in the middle of their backs and another on the back of their heads, squashing their noses into the ochre-colored tiles. They had been winded and couldn't breathe. Both had been grabbed by the Vietnamese officers in the tight little circle and simply thrown to the floor.

"Search him!" barked Dong, indicating Simpson. The sound of the shots and the commotion had stopped the party in mid-sentence. The vice president's minders, too late, had closed around him like a wall, picked him up and whisked him at remarkable speed out of the room and away. The band

stopped discordantly and heads turned to see what the fuss was all about. Women began to scream.

Donkey regained his senses, his ears still ringing from the shots, and called loudly for Captain Brown. Then he saw Big Al and decided to go right to the top. "General! Sir! General!" He was about five metres away, face turned towards him and the commotion, his warrior's eyes blazing. He marched briskly towards the centre of the crowd, elbowing his way through.

"What's going on here?" he demanded when he saw two of his men spread-eagled on the floor, being held there by the Vietnamese officers, the gun still pinned in Harding’s hand by one of his captor’s boots.

General Dong was horrified. His assassin had planted the gun in the hands of the wrong Australian! He had wanted the gun on Simpson, not Harding. Amidst the milling confusion, he was suddenly aware of the Australian general at his elbow.

"General, did you not see what happened?" Dong spluttered in broken English. "This man, your personal secretary, is he not, has shot our vice president."

Big Al looked at him in amazement. "What are you saying? There must be some mistake."

Dong shrugged, reverting to Vietnamese. One of his officers translated. "There is no mistake, general. You see he has the gun in his hand still. Is that not an Australian handgun?"

"Sir!" Donkey butted in. "Whiz didn't do that! Somebody pushed the gun into his hand, I didn't see who but that's what happened. Whiz didn't shoot anyone!"

"That's right sir!" Harding spluttered as he was pulled roughly to his feet and held tightly by two of his assailants. Very frightened, his nose bleeding freely, he turned to Big Al. "What's going on sir? "

Big Al swung on Dong, almost snarling. "Tell your men to let my soldiers go, general."

Reluctantly, Dong indicated to his men they should release Donkey. He gave no such direction to those holding Harding. "No sir, I cannot do that. This man has committed a crime for which, in Vietnam, he can be summarily shot." Big Al began to protest but Dong silenced him by raising a hand. "No, general, I do not intend to do that with your man, but please hear me out. There is more to this than meets the eye. Perhaps you would care to come into my office to discuss this further, privately?"

"No. We'll settle this right here, right now. I demand you hand over Harding to me. You've heard what Simpson said, Harding had nothing to do with it."

Dong sighed, shrugging his shoulders in resignation. "General, I'm sure you're familiar with Operation Santa Claus? After all, it is one of yours I understand?"

For a moment Big Al was stumped. How much does he know? "All right general, you and I need to talk, but in the meantime, there's no need for you to hold this soldier. If any action needs to be taken, then I'll do it."

"I'm sorry general, but I cannot do that. And perhaps Corporal Simpson would care to join us? I believe he has an interest in this operation of yours?"

"None whatsoever," Big Al snapped, turning to Donkey. "Go back to your office and don't move until I call for you. Understood?"

"Yes sir, but . . ."

"Now!"

"Sir."

The general turned to his Aide, took him by the elbow and guided him out of earshot. "Captain, go with him and brief him."

"Everything sir?"

"Yes. He's entitled to that, now. Everything. And get Errington down here fast." He turned back to Dong. "General, I will be accompanied to your office by my Chief of Staff, Brigadier Bradshaw, and Corporal Errington of Intelligence will join us shortly. I insist on Harding being kept in my eyesight."

Dong bowed. "As you wish."

Once inside his office, Dong got straight to the point. "As I understand it general, Operation Santa Claus is a plot to kill not only Vice President Ky but Ho Chi Minh as well. Is that not so?"

The fact that Dong knew about the operation did not surprise Big Al. But he had been caught by Dong's reaction to it, his seizing of Harding. He knew that unless he played his cards right, Harding would be used as a scapegoat, crucified to save face. If his military career wasn't already finished now, it certainly would be then. And in disgrace. But he thought he knew where Dong's Achilles heel lay and went for it. "Yes," he conceded, "Operation Santa Claus has operated out of my office however I do believe there are aspects of it which you do not understand general, aspects which we should perhaps discuss privately, man to man, soldier to soldier."

"I thought I understood very well general. Surely it is very clear. Your operation was to disable the leadership of Vietnam, north and south. And Harding here was the instrument of that operation. Not so?"

"No."

"No." Dong spoke flatly, in agreement. "Because in fact Corporal Simpson was to be the assassin. It was he who pulled the trigger just now and thrust the gun into Harding's hand, was it not?"

"This is nonsense!"

"Then perhaps you will explain, general. Is Simpson not a captain in your elite Special Air Service, a trained assassin?"

"No."

"You confuse me general, for does not your own operational file on this matter refer to him as such?"

Big Al gritted his teeth. He went straight on the attack, speaking firmly yet calmly, the face of a fox which has cornered its prey. "General, Operation Santa Claus as you appear to know it is a hoax, or as our American friends would say, a phony. There is an Operation Santa Claus, yes, but it was conceived to catch a spy, the woman we call Jilly. It was also designed to find out to whom she passed her information." He paused momentarily. "The aspect of the operation to which you refer could be called the bait, general. It was known to only a handful of my staff, three to be precise, including myself, and Jilly. And now, general, you too have the information, which has confirmed my strongest suspicions. The only person who could have told you about this operation is Jilly." He stopped to add dramatic effect to his next statement.

"I'm sure both President Thieu would be interested to know that you are supplying information to the VC, that you have been plotting to assassinate Ky? That it was, in fact, one of your officers who fired on him just now?" The accusations were calculated gambles, searching for soft spots, and he found one.

Dong was stunned. "Nonsense!" he spluttered. "You are accusing me of being VC!"

Big Al fired another shot, based on information gleaned by the MPs when they interrogated Swanker. "General, I also have evidence that you supplied information to the NVA regarding our Fire Support Base Carol, did you not?"

Big Al's accusations had slowly turned Dong's face the color of puce. "You can prove none of this, this, rubbish," he spat.

The two generals were interrupted by a Vietnamese officer who rushed into the room and saluted Dong smartly. He spoke rapidly. Big Al turned to Errington. "What's he saying?"

"It's Vice President Ky sir, he's survived. Apparently he was wearing a bullet-proof vest. He'll have a badly bruised chest for awhile though. Dong doesn't appear too happy about the news."

Big Al could see that for himself. He turned back to Dong, not giving him time to think. "Perhaps your vice president will be interested in my information? I don't believe he will require water-tight proof of a plot against him, do you General Dong? Ugly rumor has been sufficient in the past to cost a general his head, has it not?"

Dong knew Big Al was right. His grab for power had stumbled on a stupid mistake. A bullet-proof vest! Why would he have worn such a thing to such a friendly party? He knew Melville-Smith had him cornered but he had one card left.

"There is another matter general, one you do not know. You have talked of Jilly, or Mai Li, and seem to know much about her. Perhaps you are right, perhaps not. But there can be no doubt about who tried to kill her." He smiled smugly.

Big Al was caught off-guard. "You cannot accuse Simpson of that, I have already checked it out."

"No, not Simpson, or even Harding here. Major Swanker. And I have proof, evidence that would stand up even in your court of law." He explained about the finger prints.

Big Al, although surprised, found that he was not shocked. Anyone who was fool enough to pass on military secrets between the sheets would be crazy enough to do something even more stupid in an attempt to cover it.

"So you see general," Dong continued, "one way or another, I have one of your men in my control. Now it appears to me that, despite your argument to the contrary, Harding tried to kill our vice president. And it is certainly apparent that Swanker tried to kill our Mai Li. Do you not agree?"

So, he's going to tough it out, Big Al thought ruefully, he wants to bargain. His own prime responsibility was to protect his soldiers, no matter what they had or had not done. But he sensed that Dong was trying to say something, in the Oriental fashion, that this was just the beginning of the discussion. He decided to play that game as well.

"No general, I do not agree. And I am not prepared to trade one of my men

for another. If they have offended against your country they must first answer to their commanding officer, myself, and then the laws of their own country." He paused to ensure the general understood him, and then made his first concession. "I will certainly arrest Major Swanker on suspicion of attempted murder if you can provide me with the evidence you have."

Dong nodded. "Perhaps then, general, we can talk further."

Big Al conceded another point in the battle of wits. "Yes, general. If the major is found to be guilty as you charge, well . . ." He left the prospect of a deal hanging.

"And perhaps then we may have made a mistake with Harding here."

"In that case it may be difficult to question your loyalty to your vice president, general."

“And perhaps a visiting officer, on loan to my personal staff from another fellow general, was misguided enough to attempt this atrocity.” The little Vietnamese smiled like a fox, a gleam in his pin-prick eyes, slippery as an eel.

“Quite.” Big Al turned to his Chief of Staff. "Brigadier, arrest Major Swanker please and bring him to my office immediately."

As the Australian contingent was about to leave, another messenger rushed into the room. Errington listened. "It's Jilly, sir, she's escaped from the hospital, walked out, disappeared."

"I thought that young lady was extremely ill."

"I think, sir, that General Dong was of the same view. He's not very happy. He's just ordered her found and shot on sight."

"Right! She obviously knows too much now. Let's find Swanker before he does the same to him."

CHAPTER 28

Donkey was staggered by what Captain Ron Brown had told him, his mind in a whirl of disbelief. How could they do this to him? How could Jilly do *that* to him! Deceive him, *use* him. He felt so small, insignificant, a pawn in a game bigger than he could possibly imagine. He felt as though he should be angry, but strangely he wasn't. Just incredibly sad. Shattered. His trust had been stolen, abused and then hurled back at him in scorn. His heart burned with a physical pain. He tried to wrench his mind away, tell himself he was dreaming, but the pain was too real.

"I'm sorry old mate," Brown murmured. "I don't think the general had this in mind when he started this operation. All we wanted to do was nail Jilly and Dong, especially Dong. And in a way I suppose we've done that, but . . ."

"Never fuckin' mind me, you arse'oles, never fuckin' mind the stupid bloody Nasho, the cannon fodder. If he gets brassed, who cares? That's what he's there for."

"No, it wasn't like that . . ." Brown was interrupted by the phone jangling urgently at Donkey's elbow. He let it ring three times before picking it up listlessly. "Yes?" he snapped.

"Donkey?"

His eyes snapped open. It was Jilly. For just a split second he was excited to hear her voice. Then he remembered what Captain Brown had just told him: she was a VC spy, the one who had used him the most. And yet something inside him warned him to listen. "Yes, he barked, "what do you want?"

She picked up his mood immediately. "You know? You know about me?"

"Yes."

"But I can explain. Ohh, what did they *tell* you? No, wait, it doesn't matter. *Listen, you are in great danger.* General Dong plans to kill you. I must speak to you, tell you things, explain. Donkey, I can explain."

"Why should I listen."

"Because I love you."

Donkey exploded. "Don't give me that bullshit again, for Christ's sake!"

"I know you don't believe me but you must!" she pleaded. "I must see you

to explain. I have escaped from the hospital. I have a room at the Continental Hotel, room 301. Please come now. Tell no one. I have no more time. Dong plans to kill me too." The line went dead.

Donkey took the phone from his ear and slowly replaced it. Confusion on top of confusion. Whatever it was he felt for Jilly, be it love, sorrow, fear, pity or anger, it pushed him on. He knew he had to see the thing through now, whatever the outcome. And he had to know why. He had to speak to her. But how was he going to get away from Brown? He turned to him.

"That was Ned. He wants me up in Registry urgently for some bloody reason. I'll only be a couple of minutes."

"The general said you were to stay here."

"I won't be a minute. There's no real drama."

He walked out and up the stairs. He hurried past Registry's door and down the stairs at the other end of the building. He stepped out into the bright sun, sweat instantly breaking out on his face. He walked out through the Free World complex gates and hailed a taxi, a cold anger hardening inside him like smouldering, molten metal. Room 301, she had said. Funny, that’s the same number as mine at the Canberra.

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Despite the fact that General Dong had filled in so many of the gaps, placed so many of the pieces of the puzzle, Jilly still felt uneasy. But as she lay in her hospital bed thinking, more pieces slowly began to fall into place.

She realised she was no longer of any use to Dong and because she knew so much about him, about his duplicity, his traitorous connections to Hanoi, that made things dangerous for her. No matter. *Sin Loi*. She didn't really care, she felt so terrible. She had no wish anyway to face life with the disfigurement Swanker had given her. She melted back into her pillow until another thought slowly surfaced in her conscious mind. What about Donkey? Would Dong not target him as well because of his association with her? *Yes!* He had virtually said as much at their last meeting. Who was he? he had asked, over and over. Suddenly her resolve hardened. I don't care who he is, what he is, I love him. He cannot be allowed to die! I must warn him, somehow! She looked across at her guard. It was early morning, pre-dawn, and he was slumped forward in his chair, asleep. She slid out of bed slowly, almost toppling when she tried to stand. Her head spun but slowly she regained her equilibrium, tenderly putting weight on her feet before lifting

herself from the bed and standing up. She swayed, grabbed the bed, but remained on her feet. She stumbled precariously across to the cupboard, grabbed the few clothes there that Donkey had brought in for her on his last visit and dressed slowly, careful not to fall, make a noise and wake the guard. By the time she was ready her balance was better. She crept slowly, a little unsteadily, to the door and out into the corridor. It was deserted. She saw the front door only fifty yards away and walked slowly towards it, dreading a call to stop. It didn't come. She stumbled a little on the hospital's steps and then she was on the street. Traffic was just building after the night curfew. She hailed a taxi and collapsed on to the back seat.

She began to give her home address to the driver, then stopped herself with a start. That would be the first place they would look. She chastised herself. Think, think! "Continental Hotel," she gasped.

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Big Al flew up the five flights of stairs to his office two at a time, the Chief of Staff trying desperately to keep up with him. "Paul, find Swanker," he ordered, "we'd better talk to him before the Viets do or he's a dead man."

When he reached his office, Bradshaw snapped to Nickoli. "Do you have any idea where he's staying corporal? I know he's still in Saigon but he’s not at the officers' BOQ."

Nickoli sensed there was something desperately wrong. "No sir," he hedged, "what's the problem?"

"The Viets believe he was the one who did that job on Jilly. They're after his blood and we'd better get to him first. Find him, corporal."

"Sir!" Nickoli squeaked in acknowledgment. They knew! *Everybody knew!* Oh shit oh shit, what was he going to do? He had to get to the major first, *now!* He had to ring the Continental, that's where he was staying, to keep out of the way, but he couldn't do it from this phone. Where could he find a phone with some privacy? Then he realised. Intelligence! Major Swanker's old phone. Errington had gone into the general's office with Big Al and Bradshaw.

He crept out of the office and walked quickly, almost jogging, down a flight of stairs and along the corridor to the Intelligence office.

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Captain Brown sat at the desk of the PR colonel and pondered what had happened. Crazy, he thought. Is this what I'm eventually going to be doing in

the Army? Playing politics? He was far happier out in the bush, where everything was black and white. Shoot first and ask questions later. That was his style. He dreamed of going back to his platoon, stalking the jungle, smelling the enemy before he smelt you. That was how you fought a war, not this other bullshit. He felt sorry for Donkey, he really wasn't soldier material, nor was his mate Ned, nor most of the Nashos.

Then the penny dropped with an awful clarity. He suddenly felt very sick. Ned! Ned had gone home a couple of weeks ago and yet Donkey had said he was going to see him just now! He jumped to his feet and sprinted to Registry. No, nobody had seen him. He grabbed a dozen clerks from Registry and the Typing Pool and began a thorough search of the building and grounds. Donkey had disappeared. Brown was on his way back to the general's office contemplating what army life would be like as a private when he heard an animated and panicked voice from the Intelligence office. He stopped, his curiosity aroused. Maybe it was Simpson.

"Major, you're not listening!" Nickoli was squealing. "They know! They know you were the one who tried to kill Jilly. They're coming to get you. What are you going to do? What about me? They'll hang me as well! Oh shit, I wish I'd never listened to you! And what about Simpson, you promised me you'd get the bastard. You haven't! You've done nothing but fuck everything up! Major? Major? You bastard! Don't fuckin' hang up on me, shit, what do I do now, what do I do now?"

Brown stepped into the office and took the phone from the shaking Nickoli.

"I didn't do it, I didn't do it," stammered Nickoli. "It was the major, he did it, I didn't know anything about it, I swear." He began to sob into his hands.

"I think you'd better come with me corporal," Brown said, taking Nickoli by the elbow and guiding him back to the general's office.

Nickoli blurted out the full story. Big Al ordered the MPs to go to the Continental Hotel damn fast and bring in Swanker. The mystery of Simpson's disappearance had him worried.

"Any idea who phoned Simpson, Captain?"

"No sir, I'm sorry."

Suddenly Bradshaw gasped. "Jilly! It must have been Jilly! Remember, she escaped from Dong's clutches this morning. When you think about it, she's the best bet."

"Yes, you might be right. But where is she?" the general asked.

"Good question sir and it's a fair bet that Dong will get to her before we do."

Big Al grimaced. "Yes, you're right. Errington, have you any ideas?"

"Not really sir, but I doubt she'd go back to her own place."

"Perhaps not, but that really doesn't help us much does it."

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So the game was up. Swanker slumped heavily in the cane armchair in his room at the Continental and wondered why and how everything had come to this. What the hell had happened? How had everything gone wrong? He gazed out the window at bustling, stinking Saigon. There was little chance of escape now, he knew that. They would come and get him, lock him up for life and throw away the key. And then the thought occurred to him that maybe that was a best-case scenario. What would happen if the Viets got to him first? He shuddered, unwilling to extend the thought.

Then he saw her, through the window, outside at a street stall, buying some food, and he recognised his one chance, *only chance*, to save himself. He watched her avidly, as she turned and walked back towards the front of the hotel. He lost her as she turned the corner.

He raced from his room, intending to follow her but as he turned into the hotel's foyer she was coming up the front steps. He quickly back-pedalled, slipping behind an indoor palm, very glad he was dressed in civilian clothes and therefore less conspicuous, and watched as she walked briskly to the lifts, pushed 3 and waited. He ran to the emergency stairs and raced up the three flights to the third floor. As he peeked through the crack in the slightly ajar door of the stairwell, Jilly stepped out of the lift and went into room 301.

After phoning Donkey Jilly had suddenly felt very hungry. She knew he could not get to her for at least 30 minutes so she risked going down to the street to get food.

Swanker leaned back against the wall of the stairwell and tried to think. How could he use her to save himself? Then a wary thought crossed his mind. What was she doing here? Was she the bait in a trap? She had certainly made no attempt to disguise herself. She was just another ugly, scarred face in the crowd, another victim of the war. He decided to assume she was bait to catch him. And if that was the case, her bodyguard must be nearby. He would search the hotel very carefully, especially the lobby and restaurant-promenade deck, for signs of Dong's thugs before he made his move. He

turned and walked quickly down the stairs.

The girl on the reception desk was very observant. As Jilly had walked back into the hotel with her food, she saw the scarred face. That's the one they're looking for, she told herself, it must be. The police had asked them to watch for such a girl, because she was an enemy of the state. She picked up the phone and dialled the number she had been given.

As Swanker reached the second floor landing on the stair well, the lift doors opened on the third floor. Donkey got out, looking for room 301. He found it and knocked gently. "Jilly, it's me, Donkey," he called quietly.

Jilly opened the door a tiny crack, recognised Donkey and let him in. They stood awkwardly, looking at one another. "Come in," she said.

"I'm surprised to see you out of hospital, Jilly," he said stiffly. He tried to look at her dispassionately, not to see the ugliness, the scarring, but still sympathy welled within him. Or was it just sympathy, not something deeper, still there?

"I think I'm a little surprised myself," she smiled wanly. "But I had to see you. I had to try and explain to you . . ."

Donkey interrupted her rudely. "Are you really a spy Jilly? Are you VC?"

She looked down before nodding. "But please," she begged, looking up at him, eyes pleading. "My family was wealthy, my father a very good businessman here in Saigon. He owned factories, farms; many, many people worked for him. But business means politics in Vietnam and before the Americans came, especially, the politics of this country were very unstable. Leaders came and went, were shot, deposed, overthrown by the military and someone else installed. My father simply gave his support to the wrong man, Diem. He was killed for it, and my entire family also shot; my mother and five little brothers and sisters, and almost everything we owned stolen. I was at school, in Paris, at the time and escaped the execution. When I returned the VC took me in, cared for me and showed me the way ahead for Vietnam, the only way, the people's way, so never again could families be torn apart like mine had been. I put myself through university with the help of a Swiss bank account my father had the foresight to have set up years earlier. And I spent those years learning to hate.

"Only this year the VC have come to me and said, Mai Li, now is your time. You must help, you work for General Dong." She paused and sighed deeply. "Donkey, perhaps you know the rest."

For a full minute he said nothing. He just sat staring at her as she sat

demurely opposite him, her head down, looking at the floor. He wanted to believe her, wanted to feel pity for her, but . . .

"Jilly, it's the same story I've heard in the bars a thousand times."

She cried silently, her tears plinking on the polished floor. She had been fearful he might say something like that, frightened he wouldn't believe her.

"Why did you do it to me?" he demanded suddenly. "Shit, I loved you, or I thought I loved you; I thought you loved me, and you were just using me; worse, making a damn fool of me. For all I know now, I'll be charged with spying myself and dishonored by my own country for the rest of my life. Shit! I don't know what's going to happen."

"I did — *do* — love you," she pleaded.

"And yet you did this to me?"

"Yes. I am sorry. I know you do not understand. But I love my country too. It doesn't matter now. But you must go. General Dong believes you are the assassin and has to kill you. You are not safe here. I am sorry I asked you to come but I had to see you, I had to try and explain, but you do not see." She shrugged her shoulders. "Sin Loi. I can only say I'm sorry."

"Oh, I'm not!" The door slammed open as the familiar voice rasped into the room. Donkey spun around and saw Swanker, Browning levelled. Jilly gasped, drawing her hands up to her face in horror. He ordered them to sit together, side by side, on the bed. He slid into a chair opposite them. "What a sad little tale, Jilly my darling. And such a beautiful surprise for me. My two most favorite people, cosily together. What a bonus!"

"They're looking for you, major," Donkey warned.

"I'm aware of that corporal. And I've been looking for you two. I think you can help clear my name." He laughed nervously. "Because when you're both dead there'll be no-one to testify against me."

"You an evil man," Jilly said, clinging to Donkey.

"And you, you bitch! You tried to blow me away!"

"It is what you deserved."

"What I deserved," Swanker spat. "I'll show you what I deserved." He stood up, undid his belt and slid his trousers down to his ankles. His erection stood straight out, peeping from beneath his shirt tails. "Come here you bitch, one last time before you go. Simpson! Don't you fuckin' move one inch or I'll blow your head off. Come on slut, get down on your fuckin' hands and knees and crawl. And you bite me, bitch, and your boyfriend gets blown away."

Donkey could see that he was crazy, totally mad, his eyes staring,

unblinking, as though he had been on LSD. He was licking his lips nervously, his tongue pointed. Donkey felt helpless. There was nothing he could do, just yet anyway.

Jilly slowly lowered herself to the floor and crawled across to Swanker. He lowered himself back into his chair, beckoning her on impatiently, joyously watching the pain in the eyes of both his captives.

"Watch this Simpson," he chortled, "this is the closest you'll ever come to the best headjob in the world, 'cause this is the last you'll ever see." He turned to Jilly. "Suck, you bitch, suck!"

Tears silently coursed down her cheeks as she took him in her mouth. Never mind, she told herself, it is the last humiliation. Soon it will be all over. Soon I will join my family. I hope they are not ashamed of me.

The captain who had fired the shots at Vice President Ky burst through the hotel room door followed by six of his men and stopped in amazement when he saw Jilly and Swanker. Swanker, equally amazed, recovered quickest, switching the barrel of the gun from Donkey on to Jilly's temple. "Don't shoot!" he yelled, "Or I'll shoot the woman!"

Jilly saw the soldiers from the corner of her eye and saw some faint hope but she knew she had to move fast. Her hands flashed up to Swanker's scrotum, grabbing and yanking down as hard as she could, at the same time biting viciously into his hardness. She heard tissue and tendon rip and tear, felt hot blood spurt and heard Swanker scream.

And then she was no more. Her brains sprayed across the room towards Simpson as Swanker's finger jerked on the trigger of the pistol, at the same time as bullets from the captain's Colt 45 smashed into his chest, as blood and gore pumped and sprayed around the room.

Donkey was too stunned to move. The captain hadn't seen him initially but now turned and saw him petrified, sitting on the edge of the bed. He levelled his pistol.

"Wait, wait!" screamed Donkey, throwing his empty hands into the air above his head, just as four Australian MPs crashed into the room behind the Vietnamese. The captain hesitated. "What the fuck's going on here?" asked the MP commander before looking around. "Jee-zuzz!" he whistled. He recovered quickly, turning to Donkey. "You Swanker?"

"No, that's him there," said Donkey pointing to the corpses. "I'm Simpson. Donkey Simpson." He began to shake and shiver uncontrollably.

"Well, we're looking for you too. You’re ok now mate."

"No, no!" protested the Vietnamese. "No can do!"

The MP commander, a staff sergeant, turned on the Vietnamese, levelling his Armalite. His men followed suit, covering the other local soldiers. "Listen here Nigel, this guy's coming with me, he's an Australian, understand? You've already killed one of our blokes by the looks of it so get out of my fuckin' way! Simpson, come here. Out!" He turned back to the Vietnamese. "Now if you want a war captain, I'd just love to start one."

The Vietnamese backed off. They knew their ancient semi-automatic M1s were no match for the automatic Armalites.

When Simpson arrived back at the Free World the reluctant Australian pox doctor had to make a different diagnosis. Simpson, he said, was in too much shock to be debriefed. He sedated and hospitalised him, under guard, for 24 hours.

CHAPTER 29

The letter from Ned went some of the way towards dragging Donkey from his stupor. He had been zombie-like for a few days, unwilling to face the reality of the madness at the Continental. His mind was trying desperately to tell him it hadn't happened, it had all just been a bad dream and that within three weeks, when he caught that plane home, he would wake up, the horror over. Ned's news from home, from the real world, filled him with eager anticipation as he tore the letter open.

He was having a ball, he said, doing nothing and enjoying the beer and the beach. He had "forgotten completely about that hole you're in". Maybe so, thought Donkey, but you haven't forgotten your old mate. He was warmed by that. It would have been so easy for Ned to have done so, to have lumped everything into the one big basket and filed it under F for Forget It. *That was one ba-a-a-a-a-d scene, man. Go away.*

Ned said he'd arrived home to find "ten big ones sitting on the front doorstep". Interpreted, that meant that somehow he had managed to smuggle ten thousand dollars (in American greenbacks, Donkey guessed) back into Australia. Ned's spoils of war. The profits from kangaroo feathers, boots, beer, slouch hats, badges and SP. How he did it Donkey didn't know. He didn’t know Ned had accumulated such a fortune but had no reason to doubt his mate's word. He'll be a millionaire before he's thirty, Donkey grinned.

There was one disturbing aspect of Ned's letter though. He had been to a party, he said, about a week after he arrived home, the same crowd basically that he had knocked around with before his Army days.

It started off all right, he wrote, *but as soon as people found out I'd been in Vietnam they sort of didn't want to know. We'd be chatting away and then they'd ask why they hadn't seen me for the past year or so and I'd tell them. 'Oh' they'd say and wander off with some excuse or other. I couldn't work it out, still can't. Others, later in the night, wanted to argue about Vietnam but they just weren't rational. It was hopeless. Then I was the one wanting out. Around eleven o'clock I found myself standing around like a stale bottle of piss, completely shunned. I dunno what I did wrong. I'd tried to explain and they either didn't want to know or those that did didn't want to listen. Wrong*

baby, they'd say, WRONG! And they were supposed to be intelligent people, uni people. I dunno mate, I don't understand them any more. Can you work it out? I wondered if it was me, if I'd changed that much. Sure, Vietnam changes all of us, but that much? Anyhow, I left and went home.

"Generally people have been nice since I've been home but there appears something is missing. They're sort of reserved, too polite. After the small talk they get lost for words (so do I now as a matter of fact. Can you imagine that!!) and it just becomes embarrassing."

The letter resurrected Donkey's fears of assimilation into the community he had left only ten months earlier. Would he face the same reception Ned had faced? He didn't understand, everything was so confusing. What's right, what's wrong? What's left, what's right? Everybody's right, everybody's wrong. Nobody's right, nobody's wrong. What a mess. Ever decreasing circles and heads disappearing up their own arseholes. And they're the lucky ones. Remember? Some people lost their heads. Remember Jilly? Blown away. Not blood and brains, bone. Mush. Just red mush. Dripping from your face *(feel it, feel it! Crawling down your skin)*, your shirt, your glasses, speckled.

No! Don't remember Jilly. No answers. Ignore it. It'll go away. Best we forget.

***

Major Swanker's last ride was in a bag, green, bodies for the use of. A Hercules transport dumped him in his home town which turned out in force for the burial of a fallen hero, officially KIA.

After his arrest Nickoli turned to jelly. Big Al considered charging him with being an accessory to attempted murder but had second thoughts. The murderer was now dead; the victim, while miraculously surviving the first attempt, hadn't survived the second. Only a few other Australians knew about Operation Santa Claus and its associated dramas. It was certainly in the best interests of himself and Bradshaw that the matter be forgotten, the file destroyed. Errington and Harding had been debriefed, that is, warned to forget the whole sorry episode. These things happen in war, *sin loi.*

He had spoken to Simpson personally, apologised as far as Army Standing Orders would allow, but impressed on him that this was what war was all about and you had to learn to live with it. He was still in a bit of shock but the doctors had advised him that the lad was resilient enough to get over it. In

time, he'd forget all about it.

So what to do about Nickoli, whose tongue wouldn't stop running? After a few days Nickoli solved the problem himself. He became a raving lunatic. He was sent home to the care of Army shrinks, certified unfit for further active service, discharged and forgotten. *Sin loi.*

Big Al had been incensed, officially, with General Dong over his execution of Swanker and told him so. Unofficially he was relieved it had happened that way, because Swanker, dead, could be written off as KIA. Alive, there would have been the necessity for a public court martial and he needed that like he needed a hole in the head. Still, Dong had to be taught a lesson. And then there was the problem that they both had skeletons in their closets that they wanted kept there. A truce corrected that. Vice President Ky was satisfied that his would-be assassin, a renegade officer on loan to Dong from a unit in the Mekong Delta, had himself been summarily executed.

Cowboy Cassidy was forgiven by his superiors, who bowed quietly to his better judgement on General Dong, but he was still mightily pissed off because he had missed the action for once. Before he left to take a rest in Australia shooting kangaroos there was one loose end he said he had to tie up personally.

General Dong was invited on a gook shoot in the Cowboy's Cobra gunship. It was most unfortunate that a stray VC bullet fired at the helicopter had hit the general, knocking him from his perch behind the machine gun into the paddy fields a couple of hundred feet below. Well, that's what went on the report. *Sin loi*. Nobody bothered to try to find his pieces.

Natasha, abandoned by Cassidy, was picked up by Errington who threatened to talk very loudly unless she was sent to his family in Australia to await his return from active service. Big Al, reluctantly, arranged it. Her family, through Cassidy again, would eventually join them.

Big Al went home and was replaced by another and the war went on. Same game, same dice, same-same book-oo fuck-up, just different players. There was never a shortage of players.

***

"Ooohh my head!" complained Bassett, "that was one helluva farewell party last night."

Bassett and Donkey were sitting in the departure lounge at Tan Son Nhut. Outside on the tarmac, a gleaming Boeing 707 with a red flying kangaroo on

the tail was being refuelled. It had already delivered its 'newies' and those going home sat and paced nervously around the terminal, drinking Coke and chain smoking, waiting for their call to board.

Bassett had refused to allow Betty-Anne to see him off at the airport. He had left her apartment early that morning, promising to write, gone back to his billet, shoved a few remaining things that hadn't already been packed into his seabag and caught the sergeants' bus into the office. Donkey did the news service that morning, Bassett refusing even to go to the station with him.

Donkey returned and helped him throw his bags into the Kombi and drove him out to the airport two hours early. It was another step in the right direction, albeit a small one.

"How did the farewells go with Betty-Anne?"

“That was something of a problem."

"To understate things a trifle, I'd say. Have you decided what you're going to do?"

"You mean Betty-Anne or Diana?"

"Yep."

"No. I just don't know. I told her I'd have to wait until I got home, got this place out of my system and settled back down again . . . see how things are between Diana and me."

"Well, at least you were almost honest. Did she accept that?"

"Not without buckets of tears, four naughties and a million please-don't-leave-mes. It got a bit trying."

"I can well imagine! Four!"

"No, you silly bastard, the emotional heavies!"

"Oh. She still sent you off with a bang though, eh!" Donkey grinned.

"You know, I'm a bit sorry to be going, now."

"What! Are you out of your mind?"

"Probably. But when you look back on it, we've had a bit of fun despite all the bullshit."

"I suppose we have. But I won't be sorry to be going home, I can tell you that!"

They sat for a moment, grinning, lost in shared memories.

"I tell you what, the I House will never be the same again."

". . . boarding now for the freedom bird to Sydney." Donkey missed the start of the announcement. Bassett hadn't. He was on his feet in an instant, grabbing up bags. He thrust out his right hand and shook Donkey's firmly.

"See you mate, back on Civvy Street. And look after Betty-Anne for me — but not too well!"

"No chance of that. No! I mean yes! I mean, I'll look after her all right but not . . ."

Bassett grinned. "I know what you mean, you silly bastard! And thanks. And . . . look after yourself. You know, you're not a bad sort of a bastard for a country boy."

Donkey grinned. "Piss off! Your freedom bird's waiting!"

Bassett turned and headed for the departure gate. "Can't have that, can we!" he called back over his shoulder. "See you back in the real world!"

Donkey didn't wait for the plane to take off, it would have been too depressing. Still, he consoled himself as he walked back to the Kombi in the airport carpark, only a fortnight to go now. God, time, *hurry!*

The Tortoise was most upset when Donkey told him that Bassett's replacement had not been on the incoming flight. He was even more upset when he checked records and found that he had been duped by Bassett, that the replacement had never been booked on the flight. He raved and ranted and threatened to delay Donkey's flight home, blaming him. Donkey weathered the storm, knowing it would pass. He'd seen it all before. Silly old bastard, he thought.

"I can handle the job as well as my own, sir," he said, attempting to calm the Tortoise. "Anyway, it'll only be for a week. He'll be on next week's flight for sure."

"How do you know that! He was supposed to be on today's flight!"

"Well, we could send a 'most urgent' signal to Canberra insisting that he's on the flight."

"Can we do that?"

"Of course, sir. I'll get the general to sign a Priority One, if you like sir."

"That would get things working, wouldn't it!"

Donkey drafted a Priority One signal from COMAFV to Army Public Relations, Canberra, full of veiled threats. He showed it to the colonel who was delighted with it.

"Will the general sign that?" He was somewhat doubtful.

Donkey couched his answer carefully. "I think I know Captain Brown well enough to suggest that perhaps such a small matter needn't occupy the attention of the new general, sir. That perhaps he could sign it for him. And gone is my ticket to ride if he doesn't, boss. You said that yourself."

The general never saw it and neither did Captain Brown. Donkey signed it himself and took it straight to the Signals shack and had a mate fire it off immediately. The Army system was hopeless, but once you knew how . . . nobody would ever know.

***

He took a taxi directly to Betty-Anne's apartment as soon as he knocked off work and wasn't at all prepared for what he saw. She was sitting in an armchair, a bottle of Jack Daniels and a glass by her feet on the floor. Her hair was dishevelled, eyes and cheeks red. She stubbed a menthol cigarette in an overflowing ashtray when she saw him walk through the apartment's open door and reached for the bottle, shakily filling her glass almost to the top.

"He's gone?" She stammered out the question. Donkey nodded. She lowered her eyes to the glass, studied it for a moment and then threw it up to her mouth, half the fiery contents disappearing in one swallow. "Wouldn't even let me go out to the airport."

Donkey tried to find a soothing cliche and couldn't. He simply stared at the shattered beauty before him, soul bared, bleeding, ugly . . .

"Gone . . . gone . . ." whispered. She began weeping quietly, ignoring the tears rolling down her cheeks, her beautiful blonde hair matted, rats' tails. Totally immersed in her own grief.

"He did say he'd write," Donkey volunteered. "He told me that at the airport. He asked me to look after you."

"Yes," she sighed, "he did tell me he'd write. But he won't. I know."

"Betty-Anne, of course he'll write. He's not the sort of bloke who'd let anyone down like that . . . go back on his word, I mean. He does love you, you know."

"Love me, yes, oh yes, he loves me!" She slurred the words, shouting. "But don't you understand? I *know* he loves me — and that just makes it so *hard* to understand, to accept! Why is he leaving me if he loves me?" She sobbed loudly, dropping her head into her hands. Donkey had no answer. She reached for her glass again and emptied it in one swallow.

"Don't you think you've had enough? To drink, I mean. You'll just make yourself crook. Why don't you go to bed? I'll stay and look after you."

"Enough?" She grimaced crookedly. "Tonight there won't be enough. I'm not going to bed until this bottle's empty." She reached for the bottle again and filled her glass, this time spilling some. She raised the bottle and squinted

at it. "Not enough," she slurred, "not enough."

There was no point in trying to stop her, Donkey thought. Better to let things run their course. He got himself a beer from the fridge and sat down in the armchair beside her. For two hours she rambled, becoming more incoherent as she drank on. Donkey just listened, the shoulder to cry on.

Finally, reaching for the near-empty bottle, Betty-Anne toppled face-first on to the floor. Donkey lunged for her but was a split second too late. He grabbed her up in his arms.

"Nigh-nighs time now sweetheart," he murmured as her head lolled against his chest. She was sobbing uncontrollably. He carried her into the bedroom and laid her carefully on the bed, covering her with a sheet.

"Don't . . . leave . . . me!" she sobbed, reaching for him. He took her hand and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not leaving. I'll stay. I told you that." He smoothed her hair away from her face, stroking her cheek and forehead soothingly. "Now go to sleep."

She reached for him clumsily, wrapping her arms around his neck, drawing his head down on to her breasts. "Sleep . . . with . . . me," she begged.

Donkey started, trying to raise his head. She clung to him firmly. "No! No, I couldn’t . . ."

"No . . . no . . . no . . ." she was shaking her head from side to side, slowly. "I . . . need . . . you . . . somebody . . . close . . . to . . . me . . . *Please!*"

Donkey looked down into her liquid eyes — and understood. He climbed into the bed beside her and she wrapped her arms around him, her head on his chest, sobbing. He stroked her hair again, trying to soothe, to quieten her shattering, choking sobs.

Shit, he thought, totally unnerved now, if one of those sobs comes up solid, I'm going to be drowned in chunder. Finally she slept, still clinging tightly to Donkey.

If only Sarge Fled could see me now, he mused miserably.

CHAPTER 30

"Hey, Donkey, I heard a great new joke today," sprouted Ian McLean, the Padre's replacement.

"Umm." Donkey didn't want to know and he didn't want to listen to McLean. With only five and a wakey, all Donkey wanted was home, getting on that plane. He didn't care about McLean or Roy Williamson, Bernie Longhurst's replacement, or Max Wilson, Fred Bassett's replacement. What was the point. They were long, long timers and he was so short. What was the point of getting to know any of them, developing friendships? More than likely he'd never see them again. It had been different with the others. They had worked together over a long period of time. They were mates, they'd served together. Donkey could see that Hillingham felt the same way — he had a week longer than Donkey to serve — and he only went through the motions of showing Williamson around the darkroom, the files. There was the boss, of course. He'd been with the team for most of the time but had never really been part of it. Just The Boss. The team had always ignored him whenever they could. They'd got things done that way, or conversely, didn't get things done if they hadn't wanted to. The Tortoise had never really counted so why change things now? Nice bloke and all that, but jeez . . .

"Well it goes like this," McLean burst forth, forcing Donkey to listen. "God created the world in six days, right, and on the seventh day he had a rest, so the Bible tells us, right?"

"And while he was having that rest," Donkey cut in, pinching McLean's punchline, "he had a shit and that's how Vietnam was created."

Williamson and Wilson hooted uproariously. They hadn't heard it before.

"You've heard it," sniffed McLean.

"Only about forty seven thousand times in the past eleven months and three weeks, that's all."

"Well what about this one. There's one sure way to end the war, fix this country for good."

Wilson was taken in. "How?"

"Well, you get all the good Nogs and load them on a ship and send it far out into the South China Sea. Then you nuke the living bejesus out of the country, both north and south, total wipe-out . . ."

Donkey butted in and pinched McLean's punchline again. "And then you nuke the ship. Instant solution." Williamson and Wilson liked that one too.

"You've heard that too." McLean was miffed.

"Seventy five thousand times. Now get on with your work. I've got just five days to teach our sergeant-reporter here that a nose is for snotting out of and not speaking out of and judging by the progress we've made today, I'll need every minute of it."

Since Bassett had left Donkey had virtually run the office. The only thing he hand-passed to the Boss were the queries from correspondents who stopped in from time to time. They were the Army's problem, he reasoned. He'd never had much to do with them in the past and he wasn't about to start now. McLean wasn't a bad clerk but he'd switched off nine months before the unwritten law permitted. Wilson would never make a newsreader. What a mess, he thought. Thank God I'm going home.

There had been the odd party, farewell lunch, but they were all fairly subdued. Betty-Anne had arranged a party on the roof of her apartment block for him and invited the guys from AFVN along. It had been a good party and Donkey had appreciated it. He'd stood on the roof sipping bourbon and dry, watching gunships and artillery pound a VC rocket position just outside the city. Tracer rounds and rockets flared redly across the black sky, exploding in distant balls of yellow, under phosphorous-white parachute flares swinging lazily down.

"Just like the old days," he murmured to himself. "Nothing's changed in this fucked-out country. Probably never will." The old days! He smiled wryly. Less than twelve months ago! God, how different he felt, how old . . .

“No, you’re wrong there. The bad guys will win . . .”

Donkey turned to the voice and the first thing he saw was a black and white scarf. “Jansen! What the fuck are you doin’ here?”

Jansen looked around the rooftop, people drinking, smoking, singing, laughing, dancing. “It’s a party isn’t it? I love ‘em”.

“Yeah, you’re right there. A *gen-u-wine* celebration. Donkey’s swansong. But hang on, what are you talking about, the bad guys will win?”

“Because they will. Charlie’s so stupid he doesn’t know when to give up. So he’ll win.”

“Jansen, you’re crazy.”

“No I’m not. I’m probably the only one in this country who’s perfectly sane.”

“I once heard a totally *in*-sane general say that,” Donkey mused. “So you’re right and the rest of the world is wrong.”

“Yep.”

“And how do you work that out?”

“Because I’m crazy.”

“Jansen, that doesn’t make any sen . . .” Suddenly Donkey stopped, guffawed, and began laughing, almost hysterically. But of course it makes sense, he realised. Of course it does! He looked at this familiar stranger, who had dashed in and out of his life, singing merrily, black and white scarf blowing in the wind, and thought that perhaps he too had finally gone completely crazy, like Jansen. That at the 11th hour, he’d fallen, hadn’t made it, gone troppo. He studied Jansen quizzically. Or *was* he crazy? What *is* crazy anyway? What is *sane?* Shit, who *cares!*

“Jansen, who the fuck are you?”

Jansen laughed, throwing his head back. “Just call me Gabriel,” he snickered, raising his can in salute. “Up the old red rooster!”

“Yeah, I’ll drink to that.” As Donkey raised his own glass, Jansen turned and walked away, towards the stairs. “See you back in the Land of Oz.”

“Hey, where ya goin’ you crazy bastard, the party’s just begun!” But Jansen just waved, didn’t even turn around, and was gone.

“Friend of yours?” Betty-Anne had sidled up to him, slipping an arm through his, smiling. He couldn't help smiling back. She was all right, this Septic. They'd had a lot of fun together, she, Fred and himself. And the other Yanks at the party too, for that matter. Yeah, they were all right too. Such a pity that so many of them were so damn ignorant, naive. If only they could see *The* World as *The* Earth, *The* Planet. If only they could see that there were other countries, other people, who wanted to live their lives as they saw them no matter how primitive that might seem to American eyes. *The World — the good 'ole US of A.* World Series Baseball. World Series this, World Series that. Only teams from the Good Ole US of A need apply. If only they could open their eyes. So many 'if onlys'. And no answers.

"Yeah, I think my guardian angel just quit,” Donkey sighed heavily. He pulled himself together and turned his attention to her. “Sorry, I was miles away, just looking at those rockets. You know, it was the same when I arrived here twelve months ago. So much for progress. Still winning hearts and minds with overkill."

"You're melancholy. That's nice."

"Nice?" He didn't get her drift, began to bridle but quickly thought better of it as she gently tugged on his arm, walking him away from the throng to the high parapet. What was the point of getting uptight? No point to anything here any more. He was going home.

"Nice and romantic."

"Romantic?"

"Mmmmm. I need to feel romantic tonight." Her voice was strained, strangely high pitched, her normally low, modulated, sexy tones missing. He looked down into her lovely blue eyes. They were moist, pleading, so open, so vulnerable. Slowly tears formed in their corners. She squeezed them out, dribbling them down the sides of her nose. Others followed, forming little wet creeks in her make-up.

"I need a shoulder to cry on," she whispered miserably, turning her head on to Donkey's chest, burying her face in his shirt. He put his arms around her.

"Fred?"

She nodded, sobbing quietly. The bastard, he thought, he's written her a Dear Joan. He shifted his left hand to the back of her head, stroking her golden hair softly, trying to soothe, trying to mend a broken heart. Impossible. Another casualty of war. Another Wounded In Action. WIA. And this nameless digit would go home with the biggest Purple Heart of all time, he thought bitterly. *Sin Loi. Sorry 'bout dat. Stiff cheddar, China. We're at war, you know. War's hell. Yeah . . .*

"I'm sorry." Instantly he regretted he'd said that. It sounded so inane, so inadequate. There were no words, really.

"No," she sniffed, lifting her head from his chest and flicking her hair from her face. Donkey dived into a pocket for a handkerchief. She took it and wiped her eyes, speaking quietly as she did so. "No, I knew it was coming. I knew once he got home . . . he'd see everything from a different perspective . . . I knew it and yet I didn't want to believe it . . . I was hoping, living on hope . . . false hope . . . and I knew it . . . it was just such a shock when the letter came today . . . God, I love him!"

She buried her head in Donkey's shirt and began weeping again. "How the hell do I forget him?" she wailed, muffled by Donkey's shirt.

"How do any of us forget?" Donkey mumbled into her hair, more to himself than Betty-Anne. "We all want to, we want to forget everything and we'll all try damned hard, but will we succeed? Can we forget? I dunno."

He put his hand beneath her buried chin and lifted her face gently to his.

He smiled into her streaming eyes.

"Life must go on, so they tell us. There's life after death, you know. And we better believe that. We better start believing again, or we're really dead. KIA. Just history. Sorry 'bout dat. And nobody really gives a shit. Except you about me, and me about you. Friend about friend. Buddy about buddy."

She smiled, eyes brightening. "I think I'm all cried out now. And thanks, I needed your shoulder, I needed you. I knew you'd understand. And you're right. Start again. Forget . . . yes, I suppose you're right. We've all got something to forget, haven't we. As you say, if we can."

She reached for Donkey's face, pulling it down to hers and kissed him sweetly, then passionately, as though she wanted to change direction, rid herself, purge herself of all the pain, the sorrow, the heartache. Of love itself. Forget. And start again. She broke the kiss slowly, lingering lightly on his lips with her own before nestling her head into his shoulder.

"Let's dance," she whispered. "And then get plastered. And then maybe we can begin to forget."

"Who's melancholy now?"

"I know."

They danced slowly back towards the party, towards the music, lost in their own thoughts, in each other's thoughts, whirling, spinning, no sense, no logic . . . no answers. And the music intruded.

"You don't know what it's like,
Baby you don't know what it's like,
To love somebody,
To love somebody,
The way I,
Love you-u-u."

"Like fuck I don't!" snapped Betty-Anne.

Donkey jumped back and looked down at her, astounded. "You swore!"

She smiled at him mischievously. "I know, classical music lover, you taught me, remember?"

They laughed, clinging to one another, supporting one another. Remembering, and not forgetting.

***

The Qantas 707 Freedom Bird taxied away from the Tan Son Nhut civilian terminal, beaming faces smiling from its windows. Inside there was a low

buzz of conversation.

Suddenly a single voice near the front of the plane burst into song.

"I gotta get out of this place . . ."

And another eighty nine joined in, raucously.

"If it's the last thing we ever do-oo.

We gotta get out of this place,

Girl there's a better life,

For me and you."

Over and over they sang the same lines, until the plane reached its runway and stopped. As the whine of the engines swelled in volume, so the singing faded to silence. The engines screamed and with a jolt the plane, the Freedom Bird, lunged forward, quickly gathering speed. Outside, in the shimmering heat of the airport, the noise was deafening. Inside, all heads turned to the windows, the last look, smiles gone. Mouths shut. Silence. Speeding down the runway now, fast. Nose lifting. Up. Up. Away. Airborne. And ninety throats, choked, constricted into tight, huge lumps, tried to cheer. One collective broken sob. They tried again. And again. And again. And finally got it right. "H'RAY!"

And they fell silent again, grinning hugely, staring numbly at pock-marked, poxy Saigon as the plane banked away from hell, not really believing it was all over, that they were going home. *Home? What's that? Hey, yeah! We really are! We really are going home! Fair dinkum? It's not just another shitty joke? There have been so many shitty jokes . . . no, just one BIG shitty joke.*

"Gentlemen, this is your captain speaking." Attention snapped to the PA at the front of the plane. "We are now travelling at thirty thousand feet over the South China Sea. We have just left the coast of South Vietnam in our jetstream. Fellas, we're heading home."

Throats constricted, seized again, mouths twisted in silly grins, eyes unashamedly damp, glistening. Heading home! Home! God, it's really happening! What a buzz! What a high!

"H'RAY!" Throats finally unlocking. Pent-up emotion, locked in tight, chained for so bloody long, the dam finally bursting, bubbling out, from one, then another and another and another, mixing, flowing, until it surrounded, engulfed them all, bonding them together. Would they, could they, ever be emotionally parted? No, not after all they had been through . . . together.

The singing started again as the stewards handed out welcome cans of

beer.

They sang until the emotion drained away, leaving them empty and yet still full of expectancy — Sydney was still to come. And there would be no anticlimaxes either. It was a direct flight. Next stop, Australia.

By the time the beer ran out they were ready for sleep, if they could. Excited, but emotionally drained for the moment, most did. There was still a long way to go.

Donkey's thoughts wandered back over the last days. The guys at AFVN had given him a send-off on air similar to the one they had given Bassett, though not as off-putting, thank God. He'd warned them about that.

"I'll crack up, swear or something. It was all right for Fred, he's a pro, but I'm still very much an amateur at this game so give me a break, for Christ's sake."

They had, until he'd finished the news anyway.

There had been a party at the Canberra, a farewell lunch put on by the PR boys, a heartfelt 'thanks' from the Boss, a tearful goodbye from Betty-Anne at the airport . . . and remember . . . ? No! Forget. Donkey drifted into a fitful sleep.

Still an hour out of Sydney almost everyone was awake again. Someone three rows back from Donkey had produced a mouth organ and the singing had begun again, but more subdued, more sober. *The Green Green Grass of Home. I'm Comin' Home. Gee but it's great to be back home.*

It stopped when the captain indicated they were on final approach to Mascot. They resumed their seats, belted up, snuffed American cigarettes, sat quietly, patient, emotion slowly building again inside tight chests. Lights beginning to dot the black of night. The lights of Sydney. Civilisation. Sanity. Awe-inspiring. Home. God, it really is. Home.

The wheels touched once, twice . . . and they were down. *Home!!!*

Pandemonium. Throats unlocked, slouch hats flew, bouncing back off the low cabin roof only to be reclaimed and pitched up again, down the plane, up the plane. Grinning, smiling, laughing faces, full of undiluted, pure joy. Choking, shouting voices. Hooting, hollering. Crying . . .

Soldiers? Killers? Little boys throwing off hate, pain, despair, loneliness . . . coming home to, wanting desperately, love. That's all. Gone now, the bad dream, the horror. The Madness. For the moment . . .

The singing began again, full throated.

"And it's great to touch,

The green, green grass of home!"

The captain was speaking again as the Freedom Bird taxied to a stop outside the terminal, mission completed.

" . . . and to one and all of you, thanks Digger. Welcome home."

Digger! Donkey thought. *Digger!* Hey, how about that! I am too, I suppose. He'd never really thought about it like that, never really considered himself in the fraternity of his father and grandfather. They were the Diggers . . . but shit, the captain had been right. He was a Digger! He looked at his uniform, two hooks, the service ribbons over his left breast pocket, shiny shoes, 'Australia' badges on his shoulders, his slouch hat. Especially his slouch hat. And he was proud. Proud that he had earned the name, Digger.

They filed off the plane, grinning broadly, on to the dark, wet tarmac, home to April showers.

"Shit, it's cold!" someone said. Murmurs of agreement. But who cares now? Hell could freeze over . . .

They walked across to the silent terminal. Strange, so quiet. No banners, no brass bands. Who cares! Inside they waited impatiently to claim baggage and then lugged it towards a door marked 'Customs'. Through . . .

And the sudden shock of seeing them, roped off from Customs and only a hundred feet away. One hundred, perhaps two hundred, people waving, craning, searching for their own hero among ninety. Pointing. *There! Over there! There he is!* And Diggers too, craning, searching. *Where are they? Where . . . where . . . where . . . they must be here! They've got to be here!* Hearts pounding with hope, expectant joy, a little dread, fear. *God, if they're not here . . . they SAID they'd be here!*

"And why shouldn't I x-ray it?"

"Huh? Wha . . .?" Donkey turned to the questioner. A Customs officer.

He laughed. "I said, why shouldn't I x-ray this attache case of yours as the 'please don't x-ray' labels on it so hugely demand?"

"Oh, sorry," said Donkey, "I was looking for my . . ."

"I know, I know." He was smiling. Good, no hassles.

"The case." Donkey was still trying to concentrate on both the crowd and on the Customs officer. "It's full of music . . . I mean recorded tapes of music . . . about one hundred hours of it. If you x-ray it you'll wipe the lot."

"Are you sure it's music?" Still smiling, but . . .

"Yeah, shit . . ." Donkey was beginning to panic. No Allison yet, no Mum and now this bastard wants to wipe out hundreds of hours' work in a split

second! Shit! He fumbled for his bunch of keys.

"Look, I'll show you! I'll open it up and show you!" For Christ's sake, why are you hassling me! Nearly every other bastard has just walked straight through after the standard declaration!

The Customs officer laughed. "She's right Digger. I trust you. On your way. And welcome home."

Shit! thought Donkey, why did the bloody smartarse have to do that? He grabbed his bags hastily, clumsily, from the bench and moved towards the gap in the ropes, still craning, searching . . .

There she is! And Mum too! Oh my God . . . throat choked. Again.

Allison threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck in a stranglehold, sobbing on his shoulder. His mother was standing back, frozen, a small flowery hanky clutched tightly in both hands up to her nose and mouth. Tears gushed down her cheeks. He dropped his bags and with his one free hand motioned her forward to him. She rushed, falling on his other shoulder.

*My God! What a feeling!*He hugged them both to him, tightly — and clung to pure joy. Strangely he had no tears. *This was it! This was . . . HOME!*

"Hey!" he admonished the two most important women in his life, "what's all the tears for? I'm home, I'm home!"

"Thank God, oh thank God!" blurted his mother.

"Oh darling, darling, darling, darling . . ." sobbed Allison.

"Brian," said his mother, disentangling herself, wiping her eyes and tapping him lightly on the shoulder to attract his attention from Allison, "your father."

Donkey hadn't seen him, hadn't expected him. It was a shock when he saw him. A dream. They hadn't told him he'd be at the airport too. Suddenly Allison wasn't wrapped around his neck any more. He walked forward, towards his father. No, floated, hand outstretched. And he saw the love, the relief, the bursting pride, in his father's eyes.

"G'day Dad."

There was no answer. They gripped hands and in another second fell into one another's arms. Then the tears flowed. It wasn't a time for words, just raw, jagged, racking emotion. Love.

And Donkey thought, *it was worth it! Every shitty, bastard bit of it. For this, I'd do it all again!*

The magic moment passed. A moment he knew he'd remember for the rest of his life. They broke the embrace and Donkey was immediately swamped by his mother and Allison again. Now that he was home, they weren't going to let him go. All around him Donkey could see similar scenes of unashamed joy. Almost every Digger was being blubbered over by mothers, girlfriends, fiancees, wives. Almost every Digger . . . there were some who would have to wait until they got back home to Adelaide, Perth, Cairns, Alice Springs, Port Hedland, wherever. . .

Poor bastards, he found himself thinking. But his father was talking.

"We've booked a motel for the night and we'll fly home in the morning. Come on." Donkey smiled to himself. The same old Dad. Back in charge and down to the business at hand.

Donkey and his father shared the bags between them. Allison clung to Donkey like a limpet mine as they walked out of the terminal into the wet, grey night.

"Hang on a tick," said Donkey, putting down his bags. He had just seen what he wanted. He walked over to a large garden tub in which a tree was growing, thrust his hand into the soil and let it drift back down through his fingers.

"What are you doing?" asked a puzzled Allison.

Donkey turned to his parents. "Remember when Uncle Morrie came back from the second World War? How he has always said that the first thing he did when he got back on Australian soil was to kneel down and kiss it?"

His parents nodded. They understood. Donkey turned to Allison. "It's a bit wet to kneel down and asphalt is not exactly soil." He nodded towards his hand, "But this is." He raised a handful of soil to his lips and kissed it. "Real Aussie dirt."

"Welcome home, Digger," said his father.

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They sat in their motel room and talked until two o'clock in the morning. They talked about home, family, friends, "tell me everything, bring me up to date," begged Donkey. Then, exhausted, drained, his parents went off to bed with a warning. "Remember you two, we have a plane to catch to Melbourne early in the morning," his father said, "so don't sit up all night."

"And don't do anything silly!" His mother couldn't help herself.

"Mum!" Donkey chided, grinning.

Donkey and Allison kissed and cuddled and talked more. He thought she was the most beautiful girl in the world and told her so. He was the most handsome, lovable man in the world, she said. Whenever she had to draw breath from their kissing she told him about the wedding preparations and a thousand and one other little things about home. He lapped them all up, hungry, starving. Until finally her supply was exhausted.

She snuggled into his chest on the sofa, arms wrapped tightly around him, both savoring the first brief moment of silence between them. Then she lifted her head slowly, green eyes glowing into his, quizzical.

"Darling," she murmured slowly, "what was it like? I mean, really like?"

Donkey looked down at her for a moment, then looked away, up, towards the ceiling. *Funny, no fan. No geckos.* A motel room, thousands of miles away from hell. And a thousand thoughts, memories, horrors, fears, flashed through his mind. *How do you explain? How do you make people understand? The madness . . . the whole crazy, bad scene . . . broken bodies . . . broken minds . . . not now. No, not now.*

He leaned back into the soft sofa and looked back into her eyes. “Hey! I'm home again now!"

He hugged her tightly, kissing her tenderly on the cheeks, forehead, nose and eyes, one by one. He pulled her head back down on to his chest and looked towards the ceiling again.

"It's all over," he murmured. "Best we forget."

Author’s Postscript

I sincerely hope you enjoyed Best We Forget. Others may wish to do so too, so in their interests, I would ask you to write an honest review of the book for Amazon and other potential readers. I’m sure they’ll appreciate it as much as I do. Thank you.