

TWO

It was my day off – a Wednesday or Thursday, I forget which – and the middle of the afternoon. The sun behind me cast a bright light over my shoulder onto a large sketch pad balanced on my knees. Unook, our houseboy, sat under a coconut palm a few feet away from me beside one of the motor pool drivers whom I had learned only the week before was his father. Despite the noise around us – laughter from the swimming pool, the voices of several sergeants talking irreverently about the events of the day, a radio that blared away in the echoing caverns of the supply room, the occasional sound of artillery fire from the training field a mile away – I was able to concentrate on what I was doing. The lines of experience in the older man's face, Unook's laughing, considerate eyes that didn't show much strength, a few jagged curves to suggest the distant Hills of the Tigers, haunting, unreachable, – very likely dangerous – all fell smoothly onto the paper seemingly without any help from me. Although we knew little of each other, we felt at ease, like old friends. I was reminded – for some reason – of a quiet Sunday afternoon at home.

I went to the barracks that evening and sat under the overhead light in the room I shared with two other translators and did a second version of the sketch, a better one, that I put away in my wall-locker with others I wanted to keep. I had promised Unook's father that he could have the original. I'd put together about three dozen portraits and drawings and landscapes during my eighteen months in Kulon with which I planned to start a career when I got out of the service, if I didn't stay in Kulon afterwards on my own. I liked what I'd done and was happy about my prospects for the future. I promised myself I'd continue making improvements even if doing so meant I'd have to slither around the mental effects of the threat of fighting nearby. The military is a breeding ground for rumor, you see, and we heard stories every day that the war was on the way to Ban Houei Lan. The number of communist forces in the provinces north of us, had increased in the past few weeks. We all held our breaths. I didn't know what would become of my pictures – or of me – if there was actually fighting in our area.

It was still early in the evening when I finished my work. I joined my roommates at the EM club, where we sat at the bar chewing over fresh bits of gossip and speculating about what we'd do when we got back to the States. Markham liked to say that if we thought the army was

bad, wait till we get back into civilian life – a dog-eat-dog world out there. Feeling awash after a few bottles of tart, Kulonese beer, I went to bed at ten-thirty and slept soundly, a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

Inspiration returned with the morning. I got up early and moved to the chair by the wide windows that slid back and forth on metal tracks, where I worked with colored pencils on a sketch of the Hills of the Tigers as they looked with the sun coming up from behind them. I was finished by the time Taggart and Markham struggled out of sleep. We all went to the mess hall for breakfast.

It was the Fourth of July, a holiday for most of us. The communists in the area had been distributing propaganda leaflets about our bad behavior in the village. The military attaché in Kampong City suggested we invite the people of Ban Houei Lan to the picnic we were having that afternoon, so we spent the morning in the grassy field outside the main gate getting ready for our guests. Though we had no idea how many people would come, we planned the usual kinds of activities: horseshoe games, softball, and a relay race. The mess officer had crates of hamburgers, hot dogs, and beer brought in from the airbase in Damroon. Colonel MacIntosh, our CO, had arranged for a fireworks display to take place just after sundown, and we'd hired a band, also from the airbase.

The affair seemed to go quite well at first and by one o'clock, nearly half of Ban Houei Lan had found their way to the field. It was a fine day with a deep blue sky, spotted with high piles of clouds that floated in an easterly direction like stately, ocean-going vessels. Everyone seemed to be having a good time, even though the Americans kept to themselves, as did the Kulonese, amongst whom there was a further division between the sexes. The men gathered in small groups, like one that hunkered down alongside the horseshoe pit, and bobbed their heads and applauded whenever one of the players pinged a shoe against the iron stake. The women for the most part formed a circle at the end of the field to talk quietly among themselves while they kept an eye on their children, content to wait for the end of the afternoon, when they could return home to familiar activities.

The headman and some of the other men strolled around looking for people to talk to. My friends and I came upon him as we were heading for a boy and a girl from the village who were singing native songs and accompanying themselves on zither-like instruments. I'd seen him only once before and from a distance while I was passing through town on the way to visit my friend

Mr. Longkra, so I was a little nervous at meeting him. He was a plump, merry-looking man with wire-rimmed glasses that made him look both intelligent and prosperous and clever about the world. He asked what part of the States we came from and said he hoped we were enjoying our time in Kulon. He praised the generosity of the American people for having taken an interest in a small, unfamiliar, undeveloped country whose imperial greatness had faded centuries before. I said that the differences between the U. S. and Kulon increased its attractions for some of us. "Then you must come to our water festival in November," he said. "It's a great event. The start of the rainy season." Despite the wall of formality between us, cordiality and friendliness shone in his eyes, along with the air of superiority you might expect, so that we felt drawn into his circle and wouldn't have minded visiting with him for a while.

He went on to say that Kulon was a beautiful country, but that communist rebels wanted to destroy the fragile web of social life. I knew from conversations with Mr. Longkra that many people in the village disliked him, not because of anything he'd done, but because they believed that the government in Kampong City had imposed him upon them. The communists, who had plenty of influence, particularly resented him: they said he brought the corrupt ways of the city along with him. None of these considerations played a part in our conversation, however, for the ti-ban seemed the sort of man who didn't let his worries smother the pleasures of everyday sociability.

Just as the band began to play "The Stars and Stripes Forever", I realized that Colonel MacIntosh was standing beside me. The ti-ban stopped mid-sentence and greeted him as if he were an old friend. To get rid of us, I suspect, MacIntosh said sent us off to play softball with a group of boys who'd been watching from the sidelines.

Though I much preferred to search out the ti-ban's personality, I walked across the field with Taggart and Markham toward the boys the colonel had pointed out. We introduced ourselves and asked if they wanted to learn a game that Americans their age liked to play. I watched with amusement as they talked among themselves, speaking the same phrases over and over, but there was nothing funny at all about their shyness, for they were afraid we'd laugh at them and use our power to crush their respect for their own ways. The game lasted only half an inning, as it turned out, because two of our trainees from the Kulonese army, who'd been watching from a distance, started up a boxing match not far from home plate. We went over to

watch. Taggart and Markham left when the band began to play again, but I stayed behind and took out my sketchbook.

Kulonese boxing was entirely different from our stateside variety. It was slower and sometimes more a ballet than a blood-sport, for as the two combatants struck one another with feet and hands, the grace with which they delivered a blow counted as much with the spectators as force and effectiveness. I squatted down on the grass and held the notebook on my leg, while I rapidly sketched the action. The crowd around us began to grow. With each blow, a chorus of tenor 000's jostled the air. Mr. Longkra once told me that Kulonese men and boys had been boxing in the same way for centuries: thrust, parry, feint, pause, and thrust again. When both fighters were glistening with sweat, one of them sent his opponent sprawling spread-eagle on the grass, and the spectators broke into applause. A second pair of boxers squared off immediately and another match began. I closed my sketchbook and went to look for Taggart and Markham, who were busy at the charcoal pit.

"Boy, that ti-ban is some character," Markham said as the contents of a bag of charcoal rumbled into a brazier. "I bet he could tell us stories all day if he wanted to." He chuckled quietly to himself, as if something the ti-ban had said continued to amuse him. But his laughter faded away quickly. "We should have asked him what's going to happen. What the commies are up to."

"He knows," Taggart grumbled, "but he won't say."

One thing that surprised me is that soldiers can be the most amiable of people: the slightest occasion creates a shower of laughter and merriment. But Taggart and Markham became silent and grave, as if each wanted a few minutes in which to find a meaning for the situation we were caught up in.

As we emptied the last bag of charcoal into one of the round-bottomed braziers, Markham asked if we'd noticed the look on Colonel MacIntosh's face. "I bet he's worried about what could happen with all these people milling around and no one to protect them. It might have been okay six months ago, but now that the enemy's moving into the Hills of the Tigers, you don't know what to expect. Who needs a picnic anyway? Or a fireworks display. Most of the Kulonese are clever enough to figure out that the commies are ten times worse than we are."

"Then why are there so many slopes in the Hills of the Tigers?" Taggart asked.

"Those are the stupid ones," Markham replied.

When we finished our small task, we asked the sergeant in charge if he wanted us to do anything else. Markham then suggested we walk to the other end of the field to watch a relay race that was just starting up. A mass of fair-weather clouds was moving our way from the direction of the Bolowat River. Taggart looked northward, squinted, and said it was perfect Fourth of July weather, but there was a trace of the sardonic in his voice, for we could find nothing perfect in the day at all, unless it was the sky and the clouds and the diaphanous purple veil that hovered over the Hills of the Tigers. "Let's have war or let's have peace," he said, a good man, but impatient and surly at times; he could never get over his feeling of superiority to the Kulonese whose country we were living in. "This waiting around is enough to drive you crazy."

We heard a series of sharp, cracking sounds just then, like fireworks gone off too early, but the feminine screams that followed suggested the opposite of delight in holiday entertainment. We saw a shifting confusion of people racing for safety fifty yards ahead of us. "What did I tell you?" Taggart said. "Machine guns."

We ran toward the end of the field. I looked to the northeast: two armed, black-clad riflemen were darting into the rain forest that bordered our camp, my first glimpse – and one that I'd been dreading – of the enemy in action. Three Kulonese MP's raced past us, their ancient carbines at port arms. We heard a sudden roar of static from the PA system behind us and then the booming voice of Colonel MacIntosh. "Don't anyone move. Everyone is to stay where he is until further orders." Then the voice of Colonel Sutkambin, the commander of our Kulonese trainees, repeated what MacIntosh had said. He also ordered the MP's to seal off the dirt road that led back to town. Several jeeps filled with armed Kulonese soldiers hurtled past after the MP's. A bus then came out of the motor pool, chugged past the guard shack, and stopped at the far end of the field, where the men were gathered. A few soldiers got out and hoisted the blood-spattered body of the headman and two other civilians onto the bus. We were helpless: what could we do if the attack resumed?

MacIntosh paced back and forth in front of the guard shack with fierce, angry strides. Officers and NCO's suddenly appeared everywhere, both American and Kulonese. When the jeeps returned, MacIntosh spoke through the PA system again. He said that since the area now seemed to be clear of enemy soldiers our visitors could go home. Colonel Sutkambin repeated the All Clear. I watched for a minute as a column of people filed down the road talking stoically

among themselves with an air of dignity that was almost ceremonious, a blend of detachment and grief. My private dream of staying in Kulon for a year or two after I got out of the army seemed to be shattering for good.

Still quivering with anger as it boomed once again over the loudspeakers, the voice of Colonel MacIntosh tore me away from my musing. He ordered us back to the barracks to wait for instructions from our platoon sergeants and canceled our passes until further notice. We were not to discuss the incident with anyone outside the unit. He then dismissed us, and Taggart, Markham, and I hurried back through the gate to Bravo Barracks.

We went back later to clean up the PT field.

“It’s a sign of how low we’ve sunk that we can’t protect the people we’ve promised to help even in our own supposedly safe enclave. People in high places will be talking about what happened today.”

“It’s pointless for powerless GI’s like ourselves to worry about events we couldn’t control,” I replied.

“It sounds if you’re beginning to think like a Kulonese,” Taggart turned his displeasure on me. “Problems created by people can be solved by people. If you don’t believe that, you might as well roll over and die.” I remembered what he said.

Markham said he hoped we would learn from the shooting of the ti-ban. “You can’t sit in the middle of a war and not be involved in the fighting. If they give me a chance to go after the buggers that shot the ti-ban, I’ll take it. People like that need to be taught a lesson.”

“They don’t deserve to live,” Taggart said.

It would take a mighty blow to separate my friends from their convictions. We didn’t know very much and we were powerless. Our minds could accept what was happening around us or we could complain bitterly, but we had no say-so over what was going on.

We went back to the barracks when we were done cleaning up. While Taggart and Markham visited the EM club, I worked on new sketches. My brain cleared in the deepest part of the evening and I worked steadily for two hours. I drew the musicians from Ban Houei Lan, the headman as he looked when we talked to him, and the women all gathered together at the end of the field. I took a fresh piece of paper and sharpened my colored pencils and went to work on the incursion of the enemy guerrillas. Bright colors, jagged lines, a vector of movement from left to right and a contradicting force from the opposite direction: I wanted to show the intensity of the

moment and the feeling of fear and determination and what it must be like to believe so much in your violent cause that you're willing to kill another person, a lot to put into one picture, and so when I crawled into bed after midnight, I lay awake for some time thinking how to make improvements. I was satisfied at least that I'd tried to show the truth.

