

ASINGLE MOMENT, 1963

EAST OF THE XE XOU RIVER, LAOS

*Uneasy feelings
Gnawed at his heart:
"Beware of the water!
Tighten your girth!"*

*"Fairy Tale"
Boris Pasternak.*

The summer monsoons in the Annamese Cordillera fell in cold and dismal torrents. Two American soldiers, SSGT Dieter Leibrock and PFC Ricky Belisle, and one Meo tribesman, Ntaaj, were ten miles deep into Laos, depending at which point on the tortured border they measured. Rick watched the patch of sunlight break through the clouds and illuminate the waterfall at the valley's north end, then disappear. The monsoons were theoretically coming to an end.

The patrol's mission was road watch. Higher-higher was interested in movement into Vietnam's Central Highlands. The team had seen rain and flooded rivers, heard monkeys and parrots, and smelled jungle rot and one another. Come dusk they would move to their rendezvous point, a two-day walk, where a helicopter would pick them up if they made radio contact. If not, then it was a long and crappy walk to Kontum.

Ricky did not dwell on the events that had brought him to the Central Highlands rather than a AAA baseball team, preferably in Toronto.

There was a war coming. Come hell or high water, he would survive. The war he had so far fought was against leeches. Ntaaj had concocted some repellent, and maybe it worked some. As did a cigarette lighter and hot nail; it wasn't smart to smoke out deep in the boonies.

Of high water there was plenty, and it was receding. Stones had begun to appear. Soon, the skies would clear, and the roads would fill with troops and transport. That, however, the next patrol would observe. He noted the overcast—no sun to reflect off glass—and lifted his binoculars. In the week they had been here, he had memorized every karst outcropping, tree, probably every leaf in this jungle. He moved the binoculars slowly, right to left, scanning the valley, the same method he had used deer hunting. Movement defeated the white-tailed deer. When the animal twitched, it appeared where a moment before had been only black alder brush and brown grass.

"Ntaaj," Rick murmured. He paused the binoculars at the crossing. "Sarge."

Sergeant Leibrock was sick with malaria, suffering dysentery. Rick nodded his gratitude to the farm cows. His gut bacteria fought amoebic dysentery to a standstill. Who would have thought he would someday thank the cow for the slap across the mouth with a shit-covered tail? He drank green jungle water as if it were flowing cold from the stone spring; just spread the scum and drink.

SSGT Leibrock was not so lucky. Rick shook the sleeping man's boot, then lifted his binoculars, casting a reflexive glance to the sky that an errant ray of sunshine not reflect off the lens. "Hey, Dieter, c'mer...two hundred meters up from the crossing. Got slopes."

"Was? Slopes?" SSGT Dieter Leibrock, long, gaunt and German-born, spoke thickly accented English, lifted his head, face sweat-covered despite the cold. Born in Dresden, he went through basic infantry training in the 1944 German Army and joined the winning side in 1950. "What?" American slang gave him pause. "Ach, ja. Slopes."

Ntaaj had opened his eyes, listening, not moving. Rick hand-signaled and mouthed '*Mauvais garçons.*' They had a fifty-word vocabulary—French, Meo and a little English—in common.

"See that gap where limestone...that white stone...outcropping, then where the trail doglegs back down to the river?" Rick thought, then refocused his binoculars. "There's two men there. *Sehr interessantes*, Sarge. One's a round-eye."

"A French planter, perhaps..." Dieter murmured.

Rick passed the binoculars to Leibrock, who looked, lowered them, squinted, lifted them again. "*Da ist er.*" After some time, he said, "Russky."

"The white guy?" Rick said. "Nah. He'd be Polish, probably the International Control Commission inspecting for violations of the Geneva Accords against Laotian Neutrality."

"Russkies, I know," Dieter said. He whispered the words, spaced them, each an ingot dropped onto the water-logged soil. Rick looked up. The sergeant was shaking, his face dripping sweat, his expression distant, as if he were elsewhere, observing a different cold and rain-swept river crossing.

Ntaaj had slipped out of his poncho and glassed the valley from behind the second blind ten meters to Rick's left. The Meo and Rick exchanged glances, and the former nodded to the river crossing.

"Crap," Rick whispered.

Two NVA soldiers, AK-47s across their backs, had stepped into the river towing a heavy rope, apparently stringing a cable to permit heavily-laden soldiers to cross without getting swept away. In the tree line, Rick made out another Vietnamese, an officer or NCO, a pistol holster on this hips and clearly in charge. Dumb-ass Marine officers wore shoulder holsters, standing out like albino-bucks in deer season.

"*Schießen Sie den Russen,*" Sergeant Leibrock said.

"He's probably a Polack. See the transit and theodolite? He's an engineer or surveyor or something with the United Nations...something like that." Rick returned his attention to the outcropping, about the same height from the water as the American patrol, five hundred meters according to the binocular's range-finder reticle.

“*Schiess!*” The German words, hard, guttural and present, brooked no opposition, the sergeant's fevered mind at a river crossing in East Prussia, the Red Army patrol seeking a shallow stretch of gravel for the tanks of a motorized rifle regiment.

“The sergeant is supervising the crossing. That must be the OIC on the outcropping.”

Ntaaj pointed, and Rick now made out a mortar tube at a gap in the foliage midway to the river and between the NVA officer above and the NCO at the river. ‘No good,’ the Meo mouthed.

‘No shit, Sherlock,’ Rick mimed. Ntaaj shrugged. It was no good big-time. “Dieter, we’d better get out of Dodge.”

Leibrook pointed towards the outcropping. “Shoot him.”

Rick recalculated. Plan A: Get out of Dodge. He had a daughter he hadn't seen. He had a girlfriend to marry. He had done Ranger school to be with smart soldiers. Chain of command...discipline was part of the package.

Plan B formed in his mind. Rick signed to Ntaaj with a touch to the hip, a finger to the crossing. Shoot the NVA sergeant. “Sarge, after my shot, work the two in the water.” The sergeant wiped his eyes, then squinted at Rick. “*Schiessen sie...die die stehen im Wasser.* I'll take the long shot.”

“*Scheissen Sie,*” Dieter repeated, shaking his head, clearing his vision.

Rick and Ntaaj exchanged looks. Rick raised one finger and pointed to himself, then across the valley. The tribesman set his rifle over the log, his iron-sight M-1 as large as the rifleman.

Rick checked the elevation and range adjustment on his Weaver 2.5x 330C hunting telescope. His father had bought it for him. Their neighbor, a WWII Marine firing range instructor, had liberated the scopes, and his dad bought it for fifteen dollars, and had the farm implement dealer forge M-1 mounts, which Rick carried to Vietnam in his duffle bag. The Green Berets tolerated anything that worked; the Ranger officers were more by-the-books but loosened up in the bush.

Rick placed the cross hairs in the space between the NVA lieutenant and the white man.

Rick inhaled and murmured the sniper’s mantra, *let it surprise, let it surprise.* The crack, the kick, the empty casing ejected over his head, the M-1 settling back to position. The NVA officer lifted from the ground and was gone.

The white man—Russian or Pole or French—looked to his left as if someone had told a joke, which he didn't quite understand. ‘Get the fuck down, stupid fuck,’ Rick murmured. He moved the cross hairs over the white man’s chest, lifting the reticle just above the transit. The gun would fire of its own accord.

Ntaaj shot broke Rick’s concentration. He moved the cross-hairs back to the white man who was futzing with his theodolite. “Doesn't deserve to procreate,” Rick murmured.

The M-1 recoiled, and the white man disappeared as if the motion picture camera had been stop-motioned and the director moved the white man off-camera, before restarting the camera.

Single shots now punctuated the air, like the first patter of rain on a barn roof. A single leaf fell as Rick moved his scope to the river. A spume of water arose beside one soldier, who looked at it, curious, then disappeared, as if a crocodile had grabbed him from beneath. The second soldier, framed in the crosshairs of Rick’s scope, looked perplexed into the swirling brown waters,

understanding coming to his eyes, his head turning back to the shore. This spume rose at the soldier's rifle strap, and he too disappeared beneath muddy waters.

The fall of rain grew heavier as bullets now clipped in the trees, but far above their heads, a leaf here and there falling about them.

“We get out of here.” SSGT Leibrock had returned from the 1945 rain-swept river crossing somewhere in Central Europe to one somewhere in Laos. “You two...Back. Find...kill the mortar crew. I stay here until you are set.”

Rick scanned the clearing. The white man, Russian or Polish or whatever, had been a handsome guy. Civilian, though. Why'd he stand there so long...four or five seconds...after Rick's shot? He crabbed backward. He'd think about that later. The mortar crew, yet to appear, stood higher on today's project list.

ASINGLE MOMENT, 1963

WEST OF THE XE XOU RIVER, LAOS

Larionov, Danton Volkovich, Lieutenant, Main Intelligence Directorate, sapper, Soviet Army, felt exposed. For this, there was no justification. The border was 30 kilometers distant. The canopy was thick and clouds unbroken. The rain fell in sheets. There had been no recent reports of partisan activity. American reconnaissance aircraft would not fly blind in fog-shrouded passes. The road, if you could call it that, was barely passable on foot.

By command of an unseen signal, the North Vietnamese Army column halted. Danton leaned against a tree using his pack to hold himself upright. The tree shuddered, rain dropping onto his poncho, the sound like bullets impacting into thick and heavy leaves. A raindrop seemed to be crawling up his forearm to the pulsing vein at his elbow, and he flicked the black leech with a forefinger. He missed, and it coiled, defensively. The second flick sent it in a bush.

An NVA officer wearing a Nagant Model 1895 seven-shot service revolver in a hip holster, the theodolite tripod strapped to his pack, came close, and smiled. Danton suspected that were he in danger of capture, the Vietnamese would execute him.

He needed to piss, but didn't want the slant-eye to see his soaked and shriveled penis. He turned to the bushes and stopped. He had heard that leeches crawled into your urethra, attached themselves and engorged. The surgeon had to cut off your penis before you could piss again. Who had told him that? The Poles attached to the International Control Commission monitoring

the Laotian cease-fire. Certainly, it was a lie; all the time they lie. He pulled his foreskin back and let it go, watching the yellow stream turn pale and clear as it splattering off a large jungle leaf.

The rain was cold on his face, while beneath the poncho, he was drenched in sweat and shivering. One *portyanka*, foot wrap, tied badly at the last river crossing, had bunched into the toe of his boot. The blister on his ankle burned; that on his heel was beyond pain.

It had been cloudless that long ago morning, the breeze fresh and clear off the Caribbean Sea. The camouflage team had conducted a surprise inspection visit to assess the missile site's measures. The report would have been short and easy to write; no measures had been taken.

Colonel Petrovsky, furious and red-faced, rained curses upon the site commander's head. Colonel Varrenikov, an artillery officer in the Great Patriotic War, took crap from no one, or at least no one equal or inferior in rank. "You headquarters dick-heads want the site operational by the deadline, or you want it hidden? Which? Tell me!"

"Both, you miserable son of a bitch, you set up the launch site and you hide the fucking thing at the same time. Can't you squat and shit at the same time?" Had one been armed, surely the other would have been shot.

A silver apparition cut short Colonel Varrenikov's repartee. Both paused, gazed up with open mouths as an American aircraft, vertical stabilizer blood red, blue pod beneath the centerline, appeared overhead.

The pilot looked down upon white faces uplifted to the sun, surely smiled beneath his sun visor, saluted, and kicked in his afterburner. The recon aircraft flashed silver and gold in the sunlight and was gone, thunder echoing within open mouths. He was like the Firebird, Danton had thought.

The ZSU-23 AAA crew had been, unlikely though it seemed, on the ball. They had been tracking the aircraft, and could have shot the smart-ass out of the sky, but there had been no orders. One had to obtain permission from Moscow. Later, a Soviet surface-to-air missile shot down an American U-2, but only after the Americans had taken enough pictures to build a photographic peace bridge that would extend from Moscow to Washington, D.C.

Cuba was forest-covered, Soviet intelligence had reported. What they hadn't reported was that the trees were palms, not fir and pine, providing no cover at. Still, had they taken a few hours, strung netting from palm to palm, American photo interpreters would have had only a steaming pile on white linen to poke through.

Now, Khrushchev was on pension. Kosygin and Brezhnev had decided to stick it to the Americans here in the jungle, where you could hide things. The GRU forward reconnaissance assessed the battlefield, the point of the Soviet Army spear.

A Soviet mission had been sent to assess the material and manpower required to upgrade road networks in southern Laos sufficient to support the passage of a ZIL-131 truck. It had turned out to be a typical Soviet Army operation: the team chief, a general, had remained in Chita, Russia; the colonel had a girlfriend in Vientiane; Major Lipitov, the political officer, the fat bastard, shaking and sweating, claimed to have malaria, and remained behind in Attepeu. In the Great

Patriotic War they knew how to prescribe medicine to brace the courage of the shaking and sweating: insert a .7-gram dose of lead in the base of the skull.

Danton snorted. He was by his sweet lonesome the point of the spear. The Americans were too smart to get sucked into this muck hole.

Now only GRU Captain Larionov remained to fulfill the plan, his assignment seemingly limited to protecting the East German Carl Zeiss theodolite in its metal case, which the fraternal NVA officer carried inside a backpack. A chill clenched Danton's chest, knotting muscles across his shoulder.

What had he done to deserve this assignment? Connections. He had none. In "War and Peace," the rich kid, Pierre Bezhukhov, and the lieutenant, Dolokhov, both drunk, lashed a Moscow policeman to a bear and threw both into the Moscow river. Bezhukhov got off with hardly a how-do-you-do. Dolokhov was reduced to the ranks, transferred to a penal battalion and fought in the front line, a musketeer at the battle of Borodino. Bezhukhov had connections, Dolokhov did not.

In January, 1963, Danton, his friend, Captain Roman Baranov along with his GRU camouflage and concealment team returned from Cuba. At Sheremetyevo, they boarded buses, were driven downtown and into the Lubyanka. Were they to be executed for the failure of the *maskirovka* operation in Cuba? A gray-faced group of officers standing within the gray courtyard of KGB headquarters was ushered into the furnace room. A man was strapped feet-first to a board at the maw of a crematorium furnace. They burned him slowly, his screams echoing in the ears of fifty-five GRU officers. A spy, the KGB colonel said, a GRU colonel.

Baranov got his assignment to Dresden. Danton leaned fevered against a tree in a monsoon-flooded jungle, black leeches crawling towards his penis. The NVA officer separated the foliage, gestured to Danton to approach. "*Au dessous est la rivière Xe Xou,*" he said.

'Speak Russian, you dirty foreigner,' Danton thought. He had not thought it possible to be more sick.

He looked through the branches as a ray of sunlight pierced tumbling clouds to illuminate the waterfall. The river was like the Kamenka River in spring flood. On the opposite bank lay a small meadow, upon which surely he would soon see sheep and the shepherdess in green cape come out of the line of trees.

From beneath his poncho Larionov retrieved the plastic cigarette case that protected his Marlboro cigarettes, extracted an American lighter, its fuel tank clear plastic within which floated a plastic image of a pike striking a lure. The Polish officers of the International Control Commission purchased cigarettes and trifles at the American Embassy BX and resold them to the Soviet mission in Hanoi. Lenin would have had them shot as speculators.

The *chuchmekh* eyed the Marlboros, but said nothing, and stretched his hand inviting Danton to step out upon the escarpment. He shook from fever; it felt as if a spider web had clung to his face and neck. The distant escarpment shaped like a semi-erect penis spewed forth a white waterfall.

The GRU was in the shits now, but things turn around. The Communist Party watched the KGB, which watched the Soviet Army, which watched the Party in one great circle jerk. The

KGB would soon enough be on the outs. The GRU had intelligence officers in embassies around the world. He grinned at his porter, his executioner, as the occasion required. He was down the shit hole with foul-smelling little rats toting his pack, his journey '*beyond the seventh sea*' soon to end. He'd complete the mission, retrace his route, write his report, which the general would accept or reject.

Neither the wizard Colonel Soroka would lure the enemy to battle in such disadvantageous terrain nor could the storyteller's wondrous and magical carpet transport sufficient men and supplies from distant America.

He scraped the earth with his boot. Limestone. Limestone for road fill. He looked where the descending trail dog-legged back to the river's edge. Engineers could widen the trail, string netting through trees, and, of course, limit movement to night-time using hooded headlights. When the road dried, the trucks could manage the trail. One built bridges under as well as over flowing water. These were problems sappers solved.

Mists hung upon the peaks. He closed his eyes against rising nausea, saw lightening of the atmosphere through his closed eyelids. The sun's rays had followed the river course to the escarpment upon which he stood.

He flicked open his lighter to light his cigarette against the rising bile, brushed away the malarial spider web entangling his face, sickness and beauty alternating for his attention. Something was wrong. The soldiers erecting a rope bridge across the river crouched as one, like chickens sensing the shadow of a hawk overhead. The NVA officer yammered, pointed. No, Danton was adamant. He would not give him his American lighter. Then, a wondrous thing happened. Baba Yaga hoisted the *chuchmekh* from the ground and dropped him at Danton's feet. He heard the single knock of a knout upon a tree, the signal that the Russian witch had killed the interloper in her wood. He looked into the man's surprised eyes, observed his twitching body, as if the witch of the dark and deep forest were stripping the meat from his bones for boiling.

The order of events was wrong. First, one must retrieve the cigarette. No, open the package. He noted with some interest as Baba Yaga lifted his transit from the ground, saw the flash of light, then darkness descended.