

AGAINST ALL ODDS

I woke to clear Hawaiian skies, and skipped across the runway at Hickam Air Force Base like a teenager with the car keys...seemingly unscathed having come full-circle around the world in a fourteen-day junket that rivaled anything I'd seen at the movies. After phoning Daniel I took a cab to Ala Moana Center for breakfast at a place where he could find me. I knew he was nervous by the tone of his voice, and wondered if he was gonna turn out like Ogilvie. As we drove towards Waikiki I related the gruesome details of my scramble from Laos and the size of the incoming load...whereupon he swooned, nearly crashing his van.

I gave him a toot of coke and he began to cheer up. He was always falling into one darkened complex or another. As he gained confidence, muttering he'd have no idea who shipped the nine crates to his box, I calmly told him about the twenty-two crates of artifacts and six more time bombs on their way to him. He realized for possibly the next year he was going to live with an ulcer, and stared ahead blankly, so taken by his own doom that I broke out laughing. I reminded him that, unopened, they were harmless. But nothing could plumb the depths of his fear.

We went bodysurfing at Sandy Beach, and I lay in the sun relaxing for the first time, while he silently chewed his cud and munched on his fingernails. He worked the next five days straight at the Center Library, as I used the van to run errands, and he held his ass, manufacturing malevolent endings to our psychodrama. I went up to the University for lunch, as they had great international food, and Dan needed constant cheering. The next day he called and informed me nine friends were waiting...and we went into action.

As the sun broke over the Koolau Mountains, I tucked his van with its phony maintenance signs into the basement next to the freight elevator leading up the shopping center's office building, and set out my "MEN AT WORK" placards. Then I took a cab out to Tropical Truck Rentals, where I used a Rhode Island driver's license and several hundred-dollar bills to get a van for Daniel.

The campus began to hum with foreign students as he parked the rental van at the mailroom's ramp and loaded the nine bombs, checking their metal bands for my code of dots while trying his best to act the part of a nonchalant delivery boy. He broke into a full sweat as he read the notice that all the rest of the crates were waiting at their warehouse, and almost choked as he got me at the payphone near the elevator as we'd planned.

"What the fuck, over?" I began.

"This is no time for jokes, chief, there's twenty-eight

crates waiting for me! This will be the biggest bust in Hawaiian history! I can't do the rest, man, there's just no way!" Fuck, I thought, another Ogilvie...

I sensed he was near a full-blown nervous breakdown. "Look, I told you they can't prosecute unless you open the things. Those are the rules of the goddam game! You're home safe all the way to the freight elevator, man, and I'm waiting here in the basement, holding a million-dollar parking spot while you fidget in a fucking phone booth! Let's get this over with! Pick up the six bombs, leave the artifacts for later, and let's get this circus on the road! You're completely safe as long as they're sealed! I'll take over when I see that elevator open, and you'll be a free man and a rich one at that. Jeez, don't fail me after all I've been through...step on it!"

I tried to eat something, but my system churned as the moments ticked by like a condemned man's vigil to the sunrise. Bent slightly in the restaurant chair, I gave thanks to my vigilant GAO man, now so far removed, who'd played such a vital part in lifting that load by air for me. Anyway, it was only a game, wasn't it? I could just as well let it go if Dan disturbed me so. I knew it then. It meant far more than the money...it was to beat the odds, to play the game to the bitter end, and win by sheer belief in myself!

The shopping center began to buzz with humanity, like some concrete anthill, while I tried to read the newspaper as James Bond would've done. I checked my watch, twenty-two minutes. He should show now. The rental van swerved past me on its way up to where my plywood door-gizmo flopped on its hinge, opening the elevator steady as a heartbeat with MEN AT WORK cones keeping it in my control. He rolled his heavy load in, flushing the fifteen boxes down four floors to me, then drove the van into the ramp, stalling it to block anyone following him, and disappeared into the crowd of shoppers.

I left the paint brush and ladder at the sight of my stacked victory. I snickered and fairly threw the crates into the van, burning onto the freeway in an exhilaration more invigorating than sex, drugs, and rock and roll! I'd done it! Sequestered in the anonymity of morning traffic, I pattered along like John Q. Public, except for a malign sneer, hard to spot unless you were close.

It had become routine by now, and I could sense unusual movement or danger miles away, it seemed. Far from the madding crowds, high above Kawela Bay, I snorted coke through the afternoon, from my vantage point, covering that whole end of the island. As cautious as I was, it could have been my drugged self-assurance that brought me to my knees in the end.

While I studied the overview with fancy binoculars Tommy'd got me in Hong Kong, the minutiae nearby could've warned me of slight changes in my world...that danger was

right in front of me in tiny strips of surveyor's tape tied to the trees. Even later that night, as I bumped and jostled the boxes through the pines, I remember one of the little red strips...but the warning was too deep to register.

The waving sugarcane hid the van in dark and swishing shadows. I listened to the wind shiver through the trees, and looked on my work and smiled. The blocks of golden ganja lay on the forest floor like a cache of eggs in vitro from some science-fiction film, about to give birth to alien beings. They emanated a power of their own, and I backed away in deference and awe.

I caressed my weapon beneath my black jogging suit and crouched like a cat, while the sneer pulled once again as I felt the darkness around me like a doctor taking a pulse. Visions swarmed over me as I padded through the trees like a wraith across a mirage, and I took some delight in their passing. Leaving my treasure in the vigil of starlit pines, I crept the van out of the canefield, onto the highway, and parked it where the ambush of the blalabs had gone down. Slithering back along the beach like a Rorschach shadow from the blackened sands of Tuy Hoa, I was immaculate...at the very edge of life.

I buried the crates in a long, shallow grave, opening the last one and pouring its seventy pounds into two flight bags with custom shoulder straps. Creeping through the forest, I saw gargoyles from the inkblot at the bridge above the DMZ and felt heavy bags of explosives. The Colt warmed me, and a dark silence let me through. I found the irrigation ditch and slipped into the cold water up to my knees, wading barefoot in a patterned mosaic of weeping cane toward the highway and the tunnel under it into the mountain. This was what I did it for...not the money!

In the tunnel I felt my way through a surge of memories, like a blind man in a morgue, until I found my hooks at the far side of the road, hung the heavy bags there on timbered struts, and slipped back to the beach. Whistling to myself on the moonlit sand I kicked dried seaweed along the water's edge and muttered condolences for a job well done, heading to the van perched on the dunes in the distance. I patted my trusty weapon and remarked what feats a man might accomplish with an ego hard at work. Imagine this from a guy who couldn't spread peanut butter a while back!

As waves on the shore broke to infinity's resounding cadence, my heart steadied, my breathing slowed, and I gazed upon the ocean...bathing in the glory of a private victory. Across seven continents, through two wars, and against merciless odds, I'd won the game itself. The smile that played across my lips was Hatcher's, its essence the core of madness.

Pulling onto the highway, I noticed my dilated pupils react like radar to any foreign vibration. Stopping at the bridge, I unhooked the bags, tossed them in the back, and

drove off toward Honolulu's city lights. All around me telltale signs I'd missed could've revealed that the monstrous forces of destiny were plotting their own finale to my drama, but I was too blinded by my own power to see...