



THE BIG MANGO



JAKE NEEDHAM

**"THE BIG MANGO is a full-blown work.
There's no room for improvement.
It's as good as it gets."
*The Bangkok Post***

**THE BIG
MANG** 
JAKE NEEDHAM



**Marshall Cavendish
Editions**

“I would be glad to know which is worst: to be ravished a hundred times by pirates, to have one buttock cut off, to run the gauntlet among the Bulgarians, to be whipped and hanged at an *auto-de-fen*, to be dissected, to be chained to an oar in a galley; and, in short, to experience all the miseries through which every one of us hath passed, or to remain here doing nothing?”

“This,” said Candide, “is a grand question.”

Voltaire
Candide, 1759

Prologue

On April 21, 1975, sometime late in the afternoon, Nguyen Van Thieu abruptly resigned as president of the Republic of South Vietnam and abandoned to the North Vietnamese what little was left of his weary and wasted country.

Just before dawn the following morning, a C-118 belonging to the South Vietnamese Air Force rolled almost unnoticed down a darkened runway at Tan Son Nhut. The plane was heavy, crammed with boxes and crates that had been trucked to the airfield from the Presidential Palace during the night. Gaining altitude and turning its back on the approaching dawn, the big plane crawled slowly into the moist early morning darkness and lumbered away.

Four nights later, on April 25, an aging DC-6 provided by the American Ambassador flew Thieu and nine of his confederates quietly out of Vietnam. Each of them was carrying a document personally signed by President Gerald Ford authorizing their entry into the United States.

By daybreak on April 26, the rumors were racing through Saigon. Thieu and his cronies had fled, the whispers went, but they had not gone empty-handed. The vaults of the Bank of Vietnam were bare. Thieu had secretly spirited all the bank's reserves out of the country before he left.

It made a good story, but it wasn't true.

The C-118 that departed Tan Son Nhut in the early morning darkness of April 22 carried only a few of Thieu's personal possessions and some government archives he hoped might win him sympathetic treatment from future historians. The Bank of Vietnam's gold and foreign currency reserves were still there in South Vietnam.

The rumors did have one thing right, however. The reserves were no longer in the vaults of the Bank of Vietnam. They were in the basement of a nondescript warehouse on Phan Binh Street, a narrow, shell-cratered road just north of the American Embassy. The currency and gold were there and not in the bank's vaults because the CIA had launched an operation to get them out of the country before they fell into the hands of the North Vietnamese.

Several weeks earlier, a United States marine captain trusted by the CIA's Saigon station chief had been given the task of secretly preparing the reserves of the Bank of Vietnam for shipment to safety, and he had done his job well. That was no surprise to the station chief. He knew the officer to be a reliable man, a bit of an oddball perhaps, but well educated, intelligent, and resourceful. It was even said by some that he wrote poetry, but the station chief had never read any of it himself and he had never asked the captain if that were true.

That the man did have an intellectual bent, however, was readily apparent from the code name he selected for the undertaking. He called it Operation Voltaire. No one ever asked him why.

Two American members of the CIA's Saigon station packed a total of almost 20,000 pounds of currency, mostly American dollars, as well as a small amount of gold bullion into wooden crates. Some embassy employees, locals who had no idea what was in the crates, then trucked them to the warehouse on Phan Binh Street. The captain organized a small detachment of marines to guard the building and settled back to wait for orders to fly the crates to safety outside of Vietnam.

Those orders never came.

As the noose around Saigon tightened, the CIA pressed what was left of the South Vietnamese government to approve the implementation of Operation Voltaire and allow them to ship the Bank of Vietnam's reserves to Switzerland, but the frightened men abandoned by Thieu dithered. They clung to their daydreams like drowning men to driftwood.

Maybe the North would accept a negotiated settlement, they hoped against all reason. If it did, then letting the Americans fly the Bank of Vietnam's gold and foreign currency out of the country would suddenly look like a very bad idea. After the North Vietnamese took over, they would certainly tag anyone who had been rash enough to endorse such a plan as a traitor, a label that would undoubtedly prove fatal.

Then April 30, 1975, came, and it didn't matter anymore.

North Vietnamese artillery pounded the city remorselessly, Saigon began to burn, and the population spiraled into an ugly panic. The State Department ordered all remaining Americans in Saigon evacuated, but it took a cordon of American marines on the walls of the embassy compound, bayonets fixed to their M-16s and thump guns popping canisters of tear gas into an angry mob of Vietnamese, to make it possible.

By the time the last helicopter load of Americans lifted off the roof of the gutted embassy building and clattered through the dense smoke to the aircraft carriers waiting in the South China Sea, the crates of currency and gold stored in the warehouse on Phan Binh Street had become nothing but 20,000 pounds of excess baggage. Operation Voltaire was forgotten.

As the years passed, the few people who had known about Operation Voltaire retired or died and the more informed speculation about what happened to the Bank of Vietnam's reserves disappeared along with them. Within a little more than a decade, the colorful story of a vast hoard of gold and currency abandoned by the fleeing

Americans in the flames of Saigon was reduced to a footnote in the rich annals of Washington folklore. Only half-believed at most, and even then only by a few, the tale was filed away with Deep Throat and the grassy knoll and largely forgotten.

Then, in 1995, reconciliation became the flavor of the day. Vietnam and the United States resumed diplomatic relations, reopened their embassies, and exchanged diplomatic personnel.

The newly appointed second secretary at the American Embassy in Hanoi, a position frequently reserved for a senior intelligence officer, was a man who had begun his career, not coincidentally, with a brief tour in Saigon in 1975. That posting had been minor, he had been listed on the embassy personnel roster as nothing more than a junior cultural attach, but the second secretary was one of the few people still in public life who knew for certain that the story of tons of money and gold left behind in the ruins of Saigon was not folklore. And he had not forgotten.

As far as the second secretary knew, no trace of that 20,000 pounds of currency and gold had ever surfaced anywhere, so the first time he found an excuse to travel from Hanoi down to Saigon—now known as Ho Chi Minh City in what he thought a particularly graceless brutalization of history—he naturally took a stroll around to Phan Binh Street.

The warehouse was gone.

The second secretary glanced at the empty space where it had once stood; he took in the mounds of broken concrete and the rusting rebars that were all that remained; and he walked on without stopping.

As nearly as the second secretary could calculate with any certainty, the ten tons of gold and currency in that warehouse in April 1975 would now be worth at least \$400,000,000. Since plainly the money was no longer where it had been left, the second secretary thought he might ask around, diplomatically of course, to find

out what the North Vietnamese had done with it after they rolled into Saigon.

Imagine his surprise when he discovered that the North Vietnamese hadn't done anything at all with it.

Because they didn't have it either.

One

Fourteen months as a marine corps grunt in Vietnam had left Eddie Dare with at least one staunch conviction: he had been born for better things than crawling around in the mud with a bunch of stoned assholes. Still, when he reflected on the subject now—which was something he tried very hard not to do—he was forced to admit that practicing law in San Francisco had an awful lot of the very same qualities.

Eddie opened the *Chronicle* sports section with a sigh, propped it against a stainless steel napkin holder, and went back to his breakfast.

The Buena Vista Cafe was way down at the end of Hyde Street, right on the bay where the cable cars from Union Square turned around, and a stool at the counter there was Eddie's favorite place to begin a day. Three fried eggs, crispy bacon, that thick-cut patty sausage that you nearly couldn't find anymore, hash browns swimming in catsup, and two slices of sourdough toast soaked with enough butter to cause little rivulets to form and run down his fingers every time he lifted a slice. Eddie knew eating breakfast like that wasn't fashionable anymore, but he figured he probably wasn't fashionable anymore either, so to hell with it.

The waitress eased over with a fresh pot of coffee. Blond and athletic looking with a slight dusting of suntan, she looked like the runners in Golden Gate Park who could only find the time to put in

miles on weekends. As she refilled Eddie's chunky ceramic mug, she tossed out her most dazzling smile, but Eddie was tough to dazzle before his caffeine kicked in.

"Anything else, handsome?"

"No thanks, Suzie. Got to get to the office."

"Hey, new client, maybe? My tips going to get better?"

Suzie had been flirting mildly with Eddie ever since she started working days at the BV instead of nights. Eddie noticed she had made a point of telling him she changed shifts because she was sick of the yuppies and tourists who piled into the place every night to slurp Irish coffee and check out the action; that she liked more mature, more stable men, guys who had lived a little. Eddie didn't take long to get the idea, but it didn't really excite him all that much once he did. Suzie was okay, but Eddie was already up to his ass in okay. Okay was the story of his life.

Christ, is that what it's going to say on my tombstone? he thought to himself. *Here lies Eddie Dare. He was okay.*

"Did that woman ever call? The one I gave your number to?"

"I don't do divorces, Suzie."

"Well, you know, I figured with all the experience you've had yourself..."

Eddie winced. *Okay, honey, so I've been married a couple of times. So what?*

"This woman looked like she had pretty good money."

"I just don't do divorce work, Suzie."

Suzie rubbed at a spot on the counter that was invisible, at least to Eddie, then she tossed the towel away and sloshed coffee around in the pot.

"So, you still working on that case for the dog?" she finally asked, mostly just to keep the conversation going.

"It's not a case for a dog, Suzie. It's a case that happens to involve a dog."

“I thought it was two dogs.”

“Okay, two dogs.”

Eddie had represented Eric Ratmoski on and off for five years. Breaking and entering a few times; extortion, of course; a couple of assault charges; a concealed weapons beef; and an interstate gambling conviction. All that was pretty much business as usual for Eric, but now he had plunged headlong into the porno business. That by itself probably wouldn't have bothered Eddie so much, but Eric's recent fixation with German Shepherds was pretty far over the line.

Two dogs that Eric said he particularly loved—and Eric's choice of words there was something Eddie wasn't about to reflect on too closely—had been taken away and locked up at the San Francisco Animal Shelter. Eric had been onto Eddie every day to get them back and Eddie had been trying. He hadn't managed it yet, and he figured that if he had to sit through one more meeting with the vice squad and listen to all those doggie fuck jokes again, he was going to puke. Probably he should tell Eric to get himself another lawyer. Maybe one who liked dogs.

“I don't know, Eddie,” Suzie mused. “Seems to me that talking to people about divorces isn't any worse than watching movies of dogs humping.”

Eddie was still trying to figure out what to say to that when a customer down the counter waved his coffee cup for a refill and Suzie wandered off. Eddie jumped at his chance. He used the last crust of his sourdough toast to sop up a stray bit of egg, dropped a twenty on the counter with a wave to Suzie, and headed outside to grab a cable car back over Russian Hill to his office.

People who lived in San Francisco claimed that only tourists rode cable cars, and generally it was true. A real San Franciscan normally couldn't manage to wedge his way onto one even if he wanted to. The flip-flops and camcorders and kids wearing T-shirts with stupid slogans gave no quarter; but it was still pretty early in the day for

little hooligans to be out and about their business of ruining the city and Eddie usually had no difficulty getting on a car back over the hill after breakfast.

It had been several years now since he had moved up to the better end of Grant just west of Market. He had the second floor of a small, vaguely Victorian building with a Chinese restaurant on the ground floor and something on the third floor called Pacific Century Import Company that apparently opened only occasionally and generally very late at night. That was odd, even for San Francisco, but Eddie had made a point of not asking too many questions. That was not odd for San Francisco.

Eddie had started out as an uptown guy in a flashy, bronzed-glass office tower, then worked his way down to a one-man office over a Chinese restaurant. Most people usually tried to get that the other way around, he knew, and he would have preferred that approach himself, but you had to play the cards you were dealt and he figured he had done the best he could with his.

His first stop after he left Wren & Simon, the big downtown firm where he had started right out of law school, had been two dingy rooms over a grocery store in Chinatown. After Eddie took a few days in the silence of his new office to contemplate the stark fact that he didn't have any clients, not one, he hit upon a marketing strategy that was designed to get him some as quickly as possible.

The idea was straightforward enough. Mostly he hung around the criminal courts at the Hall of Justice, wore a good suit, and radiated a willingness to work cheap. It turned out to be a remarkably effective plan because Eddie had one important thing going for him: he was pretty fast on his feet. That gave him a useful edge over the other lawyers who cruised the courthouse in search of a living, most of whom in Eddie's eyes were only a step or two from swapping lives with their clients anyway.

When he managed to cut a few guys loose, even if he wasn't exactly sure how he had done it, he began to develop a reputation among a particular clientele as a good man to know. Almost before he realized it, he was on a roll, and it wasn't long before his client list was reasonably impressive, that is if he stuck strictly to contemplating the quantity and didn't worry too much about the quality.

Sometimes it occurred to Eddie that he didn't know much about actually practicing criminal law since he had done nothing after school except banking and finance work; but then most if not all of the people who hired him were guilty as hell anyway so he figured maybe it really didn't matter that he knew so little. Sometimes he wondered if doctors knew any more about medicine when they started out on their own than he knew about law. That thought always scared the crap out of him, and it caused him to swear that he would never go to a doctor who wasn't really old.

Eddie jumped off the cable car when it slowed at California Street for the brakeman to lock-up for the steep crawl down Nob Hill. He let the car's momentum carry him into a gentle jog onto Powell and angled off just enough to make the turn toward Grant without slowing down. It was a slick-looking move if he did say so himself and he felt a momentary stab of disappointment that some woman he wanted to impress hadn't been around to see it. Good moves were good moves regardless, he supposed, even if no one was around to admire them.

He climbed the stairs and heard the clicking from Joshua's keyboard even before he opened his office door. Eddie had known Joshua since he had been his first paralegal at Wren & Simon, although why Joshua had given up the security and prestige of a big, commercial firm to go with him to Chinatown, Eddie had never really understood. Joshua lived with a retired fireman on a houseboat in Sausalito and he was Eddie's most loyal employee. Actually, he was Eddie's only employee. Joshua was very thin and, with his full

head of long, silver hair and his rimless glasses, he looked like he had come straight to the office from a Grateful Dead concert in 1968 and hadn't left since. Eddie didn't know for sure how old Joshua was, and frankly he didn't think Joshua knew either.

"If you're thinking of giving me anything else to do, you can forget it."

As usual, Joshua didn't look up or even stop typing before he spoke. Eddie always wondered how he even knew who come in.

"I'm still doing the discovery motions in the Wong robbery," he added.

"How about starting on the Wright robbery instead?"

"I don't remember any..." Joshua's fingers stopped moving, but he kept his eyes fixed on the computer screen. "Was that a joke, Eddie? It was, wasn't it?"

Before Eddie could say anything, Joshua began to shake his head. Then he started typing again, very fast.

"That was pathetic, Eddie. Really pathetic. You're no Al Gore, are you, man?"

"Any messages?" Eddie asked, not even bothering to try for a witty recovery.

"Michael called from Seattle."

That was odd. Eddie's son had just turned fourteen and didn't call him all that often.

"Really? What about?"

"Didn't tell me. Said he'd call back later."

Joshua had recently begun to resent Michael a little and he didn't try very hard to keep it hidden. He and Eddie had never talked about it, but Eddie knew that Joshua thought Michael treated Eddie disdainfully, almost like he was ashamed Eddie was his father.

Joshua had Mike's attitude diagnosed about right, Eddie thought, and he didn't like it much either. But he also knew that being a father and an ex-husband was a complicated thing and you had to make

allowances. Joshua hadn't had any experience trying to be either, at least not that Eddie knew of, so he just let the whole thing slide and they didn't get into it.

Eddie had still been at Wren & Simon when he came home late on a wet Tuesday in November and discovered that his wife had taken Michael, as well as most of what they owned, and moved out. Before he could get a grip on what was happening to him, Jennifer surfaced in Seattle and filed for divorce and custody of Michael. She told Eddie that it wasn't his fault really. It was just that she didn't want to be married anymore, that she wanted to have her own life, not live as an extension of his. Eddie didn't really know what to say to that—actually it sounded pretty reasonable to him—so when the divorce papers came, he signed them and sent them back.

It was while Eddie was still trying to decide how he felt about being single again that what he later took to calling 'the disagreement' occurred and he abruptly parted company with Wren & Simon. That made two divorces in the same month. It had been almost ten years ago now, but he could still recall every minute of the day when the firm's management committee called him into the conference room and fired him. He could remember every word they had said. His memory of the other divorce was less vivid.

"No other messages?" Eddie asked.

"Nothing you care about."

Bless Joshua, Eddie thought; he always had everything under control. Eddie, on the other hand, wasn't really certain he'd had anything under control since about 1960. That had been the time at his fifth birthday party when he socked Becky Schulman in the nose. She had been seven and had stuck out her tongue at Eddie and called him a ninny, so he had drawn back his little fist and popped her right in the snout. Becky had bled all over the carpet and Eddie's mother had spanked him hard, although whether for hitting Becky or for getting blood on the carpet he was never absolutely certain,

but he hadn't yelled because it had been worth it. He'd cold cocked the little bitch and even now he thought she had deserved it. But he also figured that was probably the very last time in his life that he had been fully in control of anything.

"Could you bring me some coffee, Joshua?" Eddie asked as he headed into his office.

"Right away, oh master of mine."

Come to think of it, Joshua was starting to remind him a whole hell of a lot of Becky Schulman.

Eddie flopped into his low back desk chair upholstered in nondescript brown cloth—he hated those high back leather thrones that lawyers usually sat in—and dumped his briefcase on the floor. He rummaged halfheartedly through the mail and was mildly pleased to find a couple of real letters among the usual junk. The first bore the engraved return address of Martin, Fletcher & O'Brien, a famously stuffy commercial firm that occupied about half of the Bank of America Tower. Eddie threw that one back onto his desk unopened.

The other envelope had no return address at all, and Eddie held it up and looked it over curiously.

It was an airmail envelope, one of those old-fashioned ones with a bright red and blue border and the words 'Par Avion' printed in big letters underneath two exotic-looking stamps. It crossed Eddie's mind briefly that he hadn't seen an envelope like that in a long time, and it even surprised him a little to see that they still existed.

This one had been addressed by hand. Very neatly and carefully, someone had printed on it in black ink: MR. EDWARD DARE, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW, 469 GRANT STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 94108, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

The envelope wasn't very heavy and when Eddie ripped into it he thought at first that it was empty. But then he turned it up and shook it and a single snapshot slid out, face up, onto his desk. Eddie bent forward and peered at it.

The photographer had caught a bunch of young marines in a moment of horsing around with some Asian girls. From the uniforms and the look of the kids wearing them, Eddie knew the picture had to date back to the Vietnam War era, but otherwise nothing about the photo hinted at where or exactly when it had been taken.

Still, there was one thing about it that got Eddie's complete and undivided attention, and that caused him to pick up the photograph very slowly and then to sit and stare at it for a long time.

Someone had drawn a bright red circle on the snapshot using a sharp-pointed pen wielded with considerable force. The line was angry-looking and etched so deeply into the surface of the photograph that it had even ripped through the paper completely in one place, nearly decapitating one of the young marines. Eddie carefully studied the fresh, open face in the center of the red circle. The face studied him silently in return, oblivious to the deep slash yawning just below its chin.

There was no doubt in Eddie's mind. None at all. The loopy, slightly lopsided stare he was meeting was his own.

The violent slashes framing his face added a deeply unsettling element to Eddie's surprise at seeing the photograph. It bothered him, too, he had to honestly admit, that the young Eddie gazed so guilelessly out of the picture at the middle-aged Eddie slumped in a cheap chair in a crummy office over a noodle shop. That was a swipe far subtler than the harsh red circle but, for all its slyness, it dug into him almost as deeply.

Eddie fumbled for some sensible explanation for the photograph, some obvious interpretation that would match the innocence of his cockeyed young face, but nothing came to him. But as he sat and thought about it, he began to feel the unmistakable sensation of a cool breeze on the back of his neck. It was gentle but persistent, and as Eddie raised his head from the photograph to take its measure, all in a rush he knew.

Something was coming at him, something straight out of a cloudy, forgotten corner of his past. He couldn't imagine what it was, but of one thing he was absolutely certain.

Whatever it might be, it was just about to dump all over him.

TWO

Eddie wanted to forget about the snapshot entirely, to tell himself it meant nothing at all. He wanted to write it off as a prank by someone he hadn't seen in years and throw it away. He wanted to do all of that, but he couldn't.

In Eddie's experience, weird things that happened to him seldom meant nothing. Weird things, he had found, almost always turned out to mean *something*, frequently something not too good. Every time he tried to ignore weirdness until it went away, he eventually found it tattooed onto his butt. No, Eddie had decided a long time ago, it was always good policy to take on weirdness before it took him on, to meet it out in the street before it got inside his house, popped open a Coors, and made itself at home on his couch.

The problem was, he wasn't certain how to apply his policy in this particular case. For the life of him, he couldn't work out what the point of the photograph was supposed to be.

Maybe it was a threat, but he really couldn't think of anybody who would want to threaten him at all, much less in such an obscure way. Certainly none of his clients were the sort to go in for that kind of subtlety. If any of them had a problem with him, they were the kind of guys who would come around to his apartment one night with a hockey stick. But if the photograph wasn't a threat, then what the hell was it? A joke?

Eddie stared at the other men in the photograph and at the women, too, threading them back and forth through his memory. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't recall any of their faces. He might even have sworn he didn't know anybody in the picture at all, but there he was right in the middle so he guessed he must have seen them at least that once. Surely no one would have gone to the trouble of faking such an innocuous picture. All of which brought him back full circle again to wondering why anyone would send the picture to him at all, even if it were real.

The best idea Eddie could come up with offhand was to show the picture to someone else he had been in the marines with and see what they made of it. Only one guy came readily to mind, but he was close by, so Eddie tucked the photograph into a jacket pocket and headed for the door.

Joshua was on the telephone as Eddie came out of his office. He put the call on hold and turned his head until his eyes caught Eddie's.

"Must be family day for you," he said.

Eddie was about to say something impatient; he was already up to his ass in subtlety and couldn't face any more. Then Joshua laid it out.

"It's Kathleen."

Eddie had given marriage another shot three or four years after Jennifer left him. Her name had been Kathleen Strong—not Kathleen Dare, Kathleen Strong—and she had been an assistant district attorney in Marin County. He always had to stop and think to work out exactly when they had been married and when they got divorced, so he seldom bothered. It hadn't lasted very long, and thank God they hadn't had any children. Eddie flinched a bit every time he realized he was thinking that but, if they had, Kathleen would probably have hung the unfortunate kid with some idiotic

surname like Strong-Dare, and that was a future too horrible to wish on any child.

Actually Kathleen had been okay, if a little strident and overly prone to sneak attacks. At least Eddie had thought of her that way until the day she announced she had decided to leave him and move to Alaska. Kathleen failed to mention then that her motivation was neither a new found love of elk crap nor a sudden obsession with the NRA, but rather that she was screwing a federal judge in Fairbanks.

Eddie hadn't really minded all that much finding himself single again, actually he hardly noticed any change in his life at all, and he figured that anybody who ran off to Fairbanks to sleep with a federal judge probably had enough trouble already so he didn't make a fuss when she filed the papers. That meant the divorce was—what else?—okay.

“She’s calling from Alaska?”

“No, from Tiburon. I gather the judge is history and she’s back.”

“Oh, Christ.” Eddie thought for a minute. “You didn’t—”

“No, I said I thought you’d just left.”

Eddie wiggled his eyebrows a couple of times and then cut Joshua the biggest wink he could and ducked out the door. That damned picture was already giving him heartburn. Kathleen would just have to take a number if she wanted to make him miserable today.

He covered the few blocks down Grant to the Transamerica Pyramid in a brisk walk, cut through the plaza underneath it, and turned north on Columbus toward the bay. Maybe he would get lucky and figure this thing out quickly. This guy he knew had a way of doing that kind of thing.

Heluska Jones had been the endlessly good-natured guy in his platoon, the volunteer for whatever might be going. There was one in every outfit. Lusk always claimed to be a full-blooded Apache Indian whose name meant ‘great warrior’ until deeply stoned one night he admitted he actually came from a tribe called the Winnebagos and

that Heluska really translated as something more like ‘little fairy sent by the gods.’

From then on, of course, Lusk was Winnebago Jones for life. They would have tried out Little Fairy Jones for a while, but then they saw the look in his eyes and decided that fucking with an angry Indian was probably riskier than fucking with the VC. Anyway, Winnebago Jones had something. You could almost dance to it.

Winnebago and Eddie rotated back to Camp Pendleton together in 1975 and were discharged within a few days of each other. Eddie was hitching up the coast to San Francisco to get himself into college and, since Winnebago had nowhere to go but back to the hard scrabble of Northern Arizona, he just tagged along. As it turned out, Winnebago quickly found the beatnik ghetto around Columbus Avenue, or it found him, and he was home.

A hippie Indian named Winnebago was just the thing for San Francisco in the mid-seventies and for a few years he worked in a bookstore and wrote what he insisted was poetry; but as a decade slid past and Columbus Avenue turned from a hangout for aging beats into a tourist attraction, Winnebago just went with the flow and became a tourist attraction, too. Even now, after more than twenty years, he could still be found in the same little bookstore on Columbus, wearing what he thought was an appropriate costume for a hippie Indian in San Francisco, selling a few books and a lot of other garbage to tourists.

When Eddie pushed open the door, a bell on the back tinkled and Winnebago glanced up from a paperback propped against the cash register. He was wearing a shirt with a beaded front that he had bought at a garage sale in San Jose because it reminded him of the one Tonto wore in the Lone Ranger movies, and his shoulder-length, black hair was tied back off his face with a red and white beaded headband that said FULL-BLOODED AMERICAN INDIAN.

Eddie had once tried to tell Winnebago that he wasn't supposed to be an Indian anymore; that somebody had gone and made him a Native American when he wasn't looking. It had something to do with preserving the dignity of his race, Eddie explained, but Winnebago said he didn't really care too much about that since he already had all the dignity he could use in San Francisco anyway. He was an Indian; he had always been an Indian; and he intended to stay an Indian. That seemed to settle it, and Eddie never brought the matter up again.

"Hey, Eddie, my man!" Winnebago closed the book and scraped his stool back. "How long's it been?"

"Two weeks. I was here two weeks ago Thursday."

Winnebago thought about that as he reached for the pack of unfiltered Camels he always kept at hand.

"Yeah?"

"We walked over to North Beach Pizza."

Winnebago seemed to strain a moment, trying to remember as he shook a cigarette from the pack. He gave up quickly, struck a match and lit the cigarette, exhaling in a long, steady stream.

"Well, if you say so, Eddie. Can't remember a damned thing about it though."

"You must be getting old, Winnebago."

Winnebago tapped one finger slowly against the side of the cash register and considered the proposition. Eddie waited for him to decide what he thought, but when it became obvious that it might take a while, Eddie went ahead and fished the photograph out of his pocket and put it on the counter. Winnebago took another toke on his cigarette and shifted his weight slightly on the stool so that he could see it more clearly.

"Hey, that's you, Eddie! Damn, you look so young!" Winnebago lifted the picture off the counter and peered at it. "Why'd you draw that circle around your head?"

“I didn’t. It came that way.”

“Your head? Came that way?”

Winnebago apparently was not having one of his better days, Eddie reflected.

“No, the picture. The picture came that way.”

“What do you mean? Where’d it come from?”

Eddie told him.

After he heard the story, Winnebago just shook his head slowly.

“Ain’t that the weirdest thing, man? Ain’t that the weirdest?”

“Do you recognize anyone?”

“I recognize you, Eddie.”

Winnebago had times like this, times when all the foreign substances he had poured and sucked and snorted into his body over the years held a convention in his brain all at once. On the other hand, Eddie knew there were also times when Winnebago was so penetrating and insightful that he scared the hell out of most people. When the magnetic fields in his brain overlapped just right, Winnebago sounded like an Old Testament prophet who had suffered the bizarre misfortune of emerging from reincarnation as a hippie Indian working in a bookstore in San Francisco.

“No, Winnebago, anyone else. Do you recognize anyone else in the picture?”

Winnebago looked hard at the snapshot, tilting it from side to side to study the faces more closely. The smoke from his Camel formed a little wreath around his head and caught the light in such a way that it made Eddie think for a moment of some bizarrely vandalized Renaissance painting.

“Isn’t that guy behind you somebody from our squad?” Winnebago laid the photograph back on the counter and twisted it toward Eddie.

“Maybe. You can’t see him well enough to tell.”

“There’s something about his ears. They look familiar.”

“You can’t remember we had pizza together two weeks ago and you recognize the ears on a guy you haven’t seen in twenty years?”

“Man, I remember every minute of twenty years ago. Don’t you?”

“Well,” Eddie admitted, “a lot of it, I guess.”

Eddie and Winnebago stood together in silence for a moment, each contemplating the mute relic of their past that had suddenly elbowed its way into their present. Finally Winnebago took a last puff on his cigarette and stubbed it out in an ashtray already overflowing onto the counter.

“Who do you think sent it, Eddie?”

“Beats the hell out of me.”

Winnebago just nodded a couple of times, then looked up and studied Eddie carefully.

“I look at that picture,” he said, “and I got to tell you I get a real bad feeling.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning I don’t see why anybody would send it, except to say they had some sort of business with you. And don’t you think this is a pretty strange way to say that? Unless a guy was a little off, wouldn’t he just call you up and say, ‘Hey, Eddie, how’s tricks? Maybe you don’t remember me, but I’ve got some business with you.’ Wouldn’t he just do that?”

“You’d think so.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what gives me a bad feeling.”

Eddie decided that Winnebago was just being inexplicably logical for once rather than measuring the pulse of the unseen.

“How about the girls, Winnebago? Can you remember any of them?”

“No. I’m ashamed to admit it, but all them little chickens always looked pretty much the same to me. Besides, I was only in Thailand a few times.” Winnebago tapped the snapshot with his forefinger. “This is that place in Bangkok where we used to go on R&R.”

Eddie picked the photograph up and looked at it again. “How do you know that?”

“Those are Thai girls, man. Couldn’t be anybody else.”

“I thought they were probably Vietnamese.”

“Shit, Eddie.” Winnebago sounded disgusted. “How could you forget? We’d get off the R&R flights, not even get a room, just go straight to the bars. Usually slept on the floor of one of them.” He shook his head a few times. “Those girls may have been whores, but they were nice girls. They saved my life more than once, I’ll tell you. Those are absofuckinglutely Thai girls. You can bet your ass on it, man.”

Eddie looked at the picture some more and felt the memories begin to stir.

“Maybe you’re right. I didn’t see that before.”

Winnebago snorted. “You see today better. I see yesterday better. I’m not sure who that makes worse off, Eddie.”

The bell on the shop door tinkled and a very fat woman came in with a very skinny man. They were wearing matching polyester jogging suits in phosphorescent blue with white stripes running down both legs and they stood looking around uncertainly until Winnebago bounded out from behind the cash register.

“Welcome, welcome! Just have a look around folks. Hasn’t changed a bit since Allen Ginsberg and I started the place in ‘65. Got first editions of Ginsberg’s books up there.” He pointed to the rickety staircase. “Every one autographed by him personally!”

The couple nodded tentatively and started up the stairs as Winnebago settled back on his stool behind the counter.

Eddie gave him a long look.

“Sometimes commerce demands you stretch a point or two,” Winnebago mumbled, carefully avoiding Eddie’s eyes.

Eddie picked up the photograph and pushed it back into his pocket. He now knew something about it he hadn’t known before,

but it wasn't much, and off-hand he couldn't see what use it was to him anyway.

“Okay, Winnebago. I got to run. See you later.”

“Later, man.”

As he left the store, Eddie heard the fat woman and the skinny man coming back down the stairs.

“Who the fuck is Allen Ginsberg?” the woman was asking the man, but he wasn't answering.

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