



1

We sat in deckchairs pouring canned beer into glasses of ice and waiting for the roar of Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Street to become tolerable. Students and office workers in *ao dais* glided past the front of the cafe and seemed to carry a breeze from the north along with them. It was September and the nights were cool after rain in the evening in Saigon.

I looked at my watch. Half-past six: an hour to go. Still, it would not hurt to get there early.

‘Let’s go somewhere with music,’ I said to François, the doctor whose aid mission I had been covering in the Mekong the past week.

‘Where?’

‘The jazz bar on Le Loi.’

‘It’s no fun unless you go with girls,’ said François. ‘You can’t meet anyone there.’

‘The saxophonist is as good as Jan Garbarek.’

‘As who?’

‘Well, where then?’

‘The piano bar on Nguyen Dinh Chiểu.’

I supposed that was not too far from Le Loi, where I must be at seven-thirty.

We rode in a taxi past the French colonial buildings of District One that were crumbling into the lighter veils of dusk.





PATRICK HOLLAND

Then the driver took a shortcut down a narrow road scored with lanes where the poor were hustling and touting and hooking and these filthy and sparkling streets seemed infinite now at the approach of night.

At the piano bar an ageing three-piece band played jazz standards very competently and dully. There were girls who would dance with you if you sat at the bar alone for a few minutes, but I did not want the company of a girl tonight. One tall girl with a high slit in her dress and thighs like a gazelle's came in and lined up with the others and François stood up.

'You're not dancing?' he said.

I looked again along the row of perfect bodies.

'No.'

My phone rang. It was Minh Quy about the job.

'He's just walked in,' said Quy. 'Where are you?'

'On my way.'

I hung up the phone and put a 100 000đ note on the table for beer and went to the dance floor and grabbed François' arm.

'I have to go.'

'So early?'

'I have an early start,' I lied.

The taxi pulled up in front of the bar on Le Loi. Minh Quy sat with a beer at the restaurant next door. He was a short, neat man in his late thirties who had been a policeman but refused to join the Communist Party, a thing that guaranteed him against promotion, and as he did not wish to live out his days taking bribes from traffic offenders he left the police force to





THE DARKEST LITTLE ROOM

pursue a career in private investigations and newspaper liaison that occasionally included work with me. Only in Vietnam could I pay a man fifteen percent of what little I earned and that be sufficient. But then, there was this other way we made money.

‘He is in there?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Are you coming?’

‘He knows me. You know how this works.’

‘To think he brings her here of all places.’

Minh Quy shrugged.

‘It’s the tourist district.’

‘But there are as many locals here as foreigners.’

‘Yes, he is careless.’

I sighed.

‘Buck up, Joe? Remember we do the Vietnamese people a service, exposing their leaders as crooked.’

‘That would be the case if we actually published the photographs, and if we had something more on them than what might be printed in a scandal sheet.’

‘We might have something serious one day. In the meantime we make these men more careful.’

I wondered what improvement cautiousness made in a criminal as a girl with pigtails opened the black glass doors of the club and I walked into the narrow passage between the tables and stage. I saw him out of the corner of my eye: the son of an arms manufacturer sitting waiting for a politician’s young wife. This scenario was worth two or three thousand dollars – perhaps more – provided the woman came. We could probably extort both the businessman and the politician. I ordered a





PATRICK HOLLAND

beer and sat at the back of the room listening to Thuan the saxophonist. He was playing those fusion tunes he was famous for, that began with a Hanoi folk melody on a northern whistle and then exploded into a kind of Charles Lloyd hymn and I forgot what I was doing in this place and I was happy.

Then the girl came in. She waved to the son of the arms manufacturer from the door and smiled. My God, I thought, she waves to him in front of everybody, and the smile was the smile of a teenage girl on a first date. She sat down and the pair held hands under the table. There was nothing seedy about this at all, not on their part, and I felt dirty. My plan had been to sit at a nearby table and snap a photograph on my phone while I pretended to answer it. But I could not do that now that the girl had waved so innocently from the front door. I thought of the few high CPV men I knew – the one I had seen hit a girl on a bike a week ago, who had only gotten out of his car to see if the paint had been scratched, while the girl lay bleeding on the road. What if this woman was married to such a man? What right did I have to hold her happiness to ransom?

I walked to their table.

‘Làm ơn hãy kín đáo hơn ... Please be more discreet,’ I said. They both of them looked at me wide-eyed. I turned to the woman. ‘There are people here who know your husband. You must be much more careful about coming to such a place.’

And I walked back onto the street.

‘Did you get the shot?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s too dark in there.’

‘So move closer.’





THE DARKEST LITTLE ROOM

'I don't like this job. She loves him. This isn't even a brothel.'

'But the boy has money to burn!'

'Leave it.'

Quy sighed.

'*Troi oi!* My God, you're sentimental. How do you ever expect to get on in this world?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, tonight you are lucky.'

'How so?'

'I have another job. The Lieutenant called it in.'

This was the name Quy gave to his contact in the police.

'What job?'

'A girl has been found murdered in the outskirts.'



2

We rode north through the city on the back of Quy's Honda. We crossed Thu Thiem Bridge where four lanes of traffic landed in what was all at once no longer the city but dark and ragged outskirts. Spare shacks of wood and iron and unpainted concrete boxes with glassless windows. We turned right and rode along the northern reach of the river where the last blue glimmer of dusk was being defeated by arc lights on the roofs of wooden tumbledowns further north on the road to Vung Tau. The light slivered across the dark water to this rat-infested bank where a girl with two bullet holes in her back had washed up on rocks.

The girl was carried up the bank and laid before the police and Minh Quy and I like a saleable fish.

'*Cô ấy là gái mại dâm ...* She is a prostitute,' said the investigating officer. 'Probably brought from the countryside.'

'*Ông biết thế nào? ...* How can you tell?'

He switched on his torch.

'*Hãy nhìn cánh tay của cô ấy! ...* Look at her arms! The pockmarks. And she has been three days in this water. If she were a Saigon girl with a family someone would have reported her missing.'

'You do not have any missing girls on file?'

'*Không ...* Not in the last three days.'





THE DARKEST LITTLE ROOM

He could not have known this offhand. The police check system in Saigon was archaic. A report filed at an outskirts branch might not arrive at headquarters for a week, if it arrived at all.

The officer knelt and brushed silt from the girl's face.

'She is bloated of course, which makes it difficult to tell, but perhaps she was twenty-five years old. Getting on in her line of work. Especially for a junkie.' He gave a chuckle that was impossible to interpret. '*Thuốc điều trị phụ nữ xấu ...* Drugs treat a woman badly.'

I knew prostitutes in Saigon who were as clean living as nuns apart from their trade – girls who would not touch beer let alone heroin. I knew families disconnected enough not to notice a daughter missing after only three days. I thought the designation 'trafficked prostitute' must make things simpler for the detective. Inter-province underworld crimes were not in the jurisdiction of Saigon's local police, and in practice they were not in the jurisdiction of anyone in Indochina.

'She could be from anywhere,' the detective said lighting a cigarette. 'Even China.'

For a moment my breath stuck in my chest.

I knelt beside the policeman and stared at the girl's face but it was not her. What chance, after all, that the girl I looked for nightly should be anywhere in this impossible country, let alone in Saigon? Perhaps she was no longer even a citizen of the world.

Close up now I saw that needle punctures were not the only wounds on the girl's body beside bullet holes. Her ankles bore strange red welts. I lifted up her shirt. There were stripes,





PATRICK HOLLAND

as though she had lashed by a cane. But I could not be certain. Perhaps she had slipped and cut herself on the rocks.

‘Are you getting this?’ I said to the officer.

‘*Dung* ... Yes,’ he grunted. ‘Who the hell is this?’ he said to Minh Quy.

‘*Ban của Tôi* ... A friend. Come here, Joe.’

A junior lieutenant placed a sheet of plastic very gently over the girl’s body.

‘Funny how precious we get about people after they are dead,’ said Minh Quy when we walked back to the top of the bank. He lit one of his bitter Vietnamese cigarettes and the dank river wind blew sparks into the dark. ‘You should have seen the fat old major fishing her out when you were getting your camera, careful not to bump her head on the rocks. When she was alive she would have been as welcome on his doorstep as a rat, though he may have stood at the door where she worked once or twice. I suppose people are more likeable in the abstract,’ he said.

‘Yes. And there is no greater abstraction than death.’

I looked around and wondered what the scene that lay before us meant.

There was nothing here but the girl. A single street light flickered thirty yards down the road and an old woman who stood beneath it to no apparent purpose. In the northern distance was the gaudy neon cross of one of those French-Vietnamese churches. Across the water to the south you could see the Bitexco financial tower and the hotel boardwalks, ethereal and unreachable, and I thought I had never been in a place so close to a city and so far from it. Here there were no clubs. No bars. I took a photograph and penned notes





THE DARKEST LITTLE ROOM

that I would send to one of my papers when I got back to my apartment.

We rode back into town on Quy's Honda. I shouted into the wind.

'Say the girl was a prostitute – why would someone want to kill her?'

'You can't think of any reasons?'

'Many. But I want to hear yours.'

'Perhaps her pimp ran out of use for her,' Quy shouted. 'Also she may have gotten sick.'

'So he shot her?'

'Why not? If she threatened to leave on bad terms? Girls like that can know enough to get powerful men put in jail. Or perhaps it was a guilty customer, someone the girl was trying to extort – perhaps threatened to inform on him to his wife. Or perhaps she was killed by an evil thrill seeker.'

'Yes. I thought that.'

The bright lights of the city were beginning to cluster again and I thought how the night was beautiful and cool on the back of a motorbike at speed through the radiant locales of inner Saigon, and I thought how awful and strange this place was and how I did not ever want to leave.

We parked the bike at Quy's house and walked through alleys that were threads of a labyrinth you could walk all night and not come to its end, the attributes shuffling like cards: lantern-lit children inside Chinese doors became children behind French doors in the next block; a shrine to Buddha became a shrine to St Maria that became a shrine to a dead father;





PATRICK HOLLAND

men playing checkers on one corner were replaced by the same drunken trio playing chess on another ...

We took a beer at the Cafe Hoang on Bui Vien.

I pushed a 50 000đ note across the table. Minh Quy waved his hand.

'Take it,' I said, 'for calling me tonight.' I signalled to a waitress to bring us two Saigon Reds.

'But you know what's truly strange?' said Quy.

'How far she was from the tourist centres and brothel districts.'

'And nothing floats upstream.'

We drank in silence, contemplating this.

'I'll talk to Zhuan about the girl tomorrow,' I said. 'There's not much goes on in the city that he doesn't know about. He has connections in the Interior Ministry. There might be a story.'

'I don't know how you tolerate that vulture.'

'Zhuan? He's a businessman like any other.'

'Yes, he's a crook. You know as well as I do that he earned that suburban redevelopment contract last year by blackmail.'

'There is often a fine line between blackmail and negotiation.'

'Is that what Zhuan says?'

'Isn't it true?'

'The line is very fine in Zhuan's case.'

'The man fitted bathtubs and shower heads in buildings where people used to have to hose themselves in their doorways. Now you Vietnamese are better washed than ever before. It hurts you, perhaps, that it took a Chinaman to do it – and that he had to get dirt on a government man before he was allowed to clean you.'





THE DARKEST LITTLE ROOM

Minh Quy smiled.

‘How witty. But if you continue this way we will not be friends.’

I finished my beer and stood up. ‘Goodnight, Quy.’

Minh Quy raised his glass and I walked out into the stream of people coursing along the street.

