

A DOPE SMUGGLER'S  
TRUE ADVENTURES  
FROM THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE  
TO THE GOLDEN GATE

# BLOWBACK



MICHAEL FORWELL  
WITH LEE BULLMAN

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*With Lee Bullman*

SIDGWICK & JACKSON



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*To my family*

*For May, Nicole, Nicholas, Nigel and Tonia  
“Thanks for a second chance”*

*To my colleagues*

*This adventure could not have happened without the quiet genius of Robert Leitzman. R.I.P.  
M.G.F*

*For Janine, and MWC  
L.B.*

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## PROLOGUE

# ‘MICHAEL . . . THEY’RE SHOOTING AT US . . .’

End of the road. Singapore 1988.

After all the years of dope deals, all the boats loaded up on deserted tropical beaches, after all the nightclubs and the hotel suites, after all the helicopters, the first-class plane tickets and the cash and the cars. After all of that, sleep had only just come.

It had finally ridden into town on the back of the last couple of nightcaps, those last two cut-glass tumblers filled with three-finger shots of whisky, the expensive stuff with the smooth bite that was a little more than I seemed to drink these days. Not that I was boozing to pass-out point, but I was definitely drinking more lately, it was going down easy and somewhere over the years my tolerance had shot way up.

The local humidity didn't help, that fierce, unrelenting Asian heat clung to the Equator and radiated out from there in waves that just kept coming, long after the sun had set. For a man born in southern England and educated on the north coast of Scotland, it still took some getting used to no matter how much I travelled, and I'd travelled a lot.

Despite the open window in the darkened bedroom the curtains weren't twitching, the night was far too still for that. The air-conditioning was always on but never seemed to work, the climate beat my hands down. Its soft buzz mixed with traffic noise punctuated by the odd raised voice drifting lazily up from somewhere out there in a subdued monotone hum, providing a blacktop backdrop to whatever it was that I dreamed about. That was another thing with the booze, you could never remember your dreams.

On the bedside table next to me, seconds floated silently by on the yellow-gold Rolex GMT Master, my favourite watch, its perpetual motion and floating hands issuing this unheeded, elegant warning that time was running out. Then my phone kicked in. Its shrill, insistent ring roused me in a singularly rude jolt, smashing through the sleep and the booze and the dreams and changing everything. Changing it all for ever.

There was a moment of light confusion then as the fog lifted and the head cleared and I padded over the thick cream carpet to the new telephone. State of the art, top of the range, best you can get, just like everything else, like the speedboat, the nightclub, the Rolex, the private island and the one-call mobile phone, another expensive toy to keep me one step ahead in the cat and mouse game that was covering the continents. The call could only be from one person, and it could only mean one thing. This was bad news, the worst.

‘An urgent message has come through for you, Mr Forwell,’ a soft female voice said. ‘From the boat . . . There is some trouble, I think.’



I'm Michael Forwell, aka Rodney Wayne Boggs, aka Michael Charles Young, aka Michael Leslie Stocks, aka Michael Escreet, aka The Fox. I'm a successful bar-owner, I'm a millionaire dope smuggler, a dedicated adventurer, and I'm listening to the voice at the other end of the line tell me that a fax marked urgent has just arrived at the office I kept over at the Marina. I took a grateful moment then to register that the call hadn't woken my wife May. I have always been careful to shield her from my business dealings and now May sleeps soundly on in the bed I had just left, blissfully unaware of what was about to befall us as I tried to focus on the message read out to me, even though somewhere deep down, where the fear lives, I already knew what it said: Sammy needs to speak to me. Sammy needs to speak to me right now.

Samuel Colflesh was the gang's logistics man, a tactician par excellence. He'd had the current operation running parade-ground smooth up to that point. Now he was calling from a different time zone, 600 miles from the edge of America and closing in on the Washington coast manning the bridge of my converted oil-supply ship *Encounter Bay*, the ship that was currently in the process of smuggling over seventy tonnes of vacuum-packed, quality-assured high-grade marijuana into the United States of America.

That was enough dope to keep California high for a month. Every third person in America could have rolled a joint and the whole country could have got high.

If I'd had the time I might have allowed myself the luxury of reflecting on the irony of the situation. I might have taken a moment to consider that of all the operations to go wrong it almost had to be this one, this one last haul, this shipment so big that when the money came rolling in neither I nor my partners in crime would ever have had to work again. And the irony didn't end there. It wasn't even our dope we were moving this time; we were working as hired hands to carry someone else's product, a multi-million-dollar international delivery service, coast to coast. When pay-day came on this final smuggling run we'd have been *weighing* that money rather than counting it.

But those synapses weren't snapping, not yet. This was no time to reflect on what happens when you break my old friend Lietzman's number one rule (Rule 1 - No Outsiders. Rule 2 - No Outsiders). It was too late in the day and too early in the morning for that.

I needed to speak to Sammy on board *Encounter Bay*, to touch base and get to the whys and wherefores, and to see if there was anything left. And it wouldn't be easy.

Communication between members of the gang, especially when we were, as now, in the middle of an operation, was never simple. There were codes, rules and procedures; there was even an operational manual for God's sake, running to fifteen pages, courtesy of Sammy. Mobile phones, still a relatively new and expensive technology in the late 1980s, were often bought by the gang in order to make a single call before being discarded lest the relevant authorities should begin to take an interest in whatever it is that international drug smugglers talk to one another about. The phone in the apartment was unusable for the same reason.

The obsession with security was by now so ingrained within the gang that I knew I could only make the shore-to-ship call from a public call box, but my problems didn't end there. It was 3 a.m. and I was in Singapore. I needed a call box and phone cards. I needed an aspirin, breakfast and a shave, but those could all wait. Calling the satellite phone on the bridge of *Encounter Bay* would be expensive although it is all relative, I suppose – there was, after all, close to three hundred million dollars' worth of dope on the boat.

I dressed in a hurry and left the apartment. My white Jaguar was parked at the kerbside and I gunned it, the stereo and engine springing to life as one, Salt 'n' Pepa's 'Push It' filling the car and throwing me, all Blaupunkt bass and synsonic drum pattern. *Get up on this*. Then it was stereo off and foot down hard as I swerved fast and loose, carving up empty streets, running red lights. I hit town, parked the Sovereign haphazardly and started running, running through Singapore's hot streets straight

busy with the business of night, ignoring the stares from the few around at that hour as the blood started pumping and the sweat to pour, blind to everything but getting in touch. Focused only on finding out.

I soon found myself three miles from home, in the city's majestic main Post Office, a century old and surrounded on three sides by the Singapore river, still open for business despite the hour. I bought the phone cards I needed, peeling off cash from a healthy roll in my loose-cut Brioni chino pocket, regulation wear for the prosperous local ex-pat, and headed across the marble floor to the neat row of phone booths. My heartbeat was louder by now than the footfalls of my soft leather slip-ons, filling the cavernous space around me with the slow white noise of panic. The jade and gold oval ring I wore as a trademark of sorts, blurred in green and gold as I punched digits, then hung in mid-air for a moment as I took in my surroundings and caught my breath, waiting for the call to connect and Sammy to pick up.

The Post Office was built on a grand scale, shades of European classicism slap-bang in the heart of downtown South East Asia, a mahogany and marble reminder of the city's own profitable excursion into the drug business, paid for by the opium trade back in the colonial days. Yet more irony.

Ring ring click. 'Fox?' When Sammy called me by my nickname – we all used nicknames, part of the fun, part of the secret-keeping, part of the life – the panic that I had been fighting to stave off receded a little. The American at the other end of the line sounded remarkably cool for a man in so much trouble. But that was no more than you'd expect. After all, we'd nicknamed Sammy 'Haig' in reference to the general who'd kicked ass all over India.

Samuel Colflesh had sent his message to me as soon as he'd heard the unmistakable whirr of an aeroplane engine overhead, just before he'd changed course and tried in vain to lose the tail. Moments later the distinctive paint-job of the Coast Guard C-130, the white body with the blue and orange stripe, had emerged seemingly straight from the heart of the sun and buzzed *Encounter Bay* from the west, getting a lock on its position and radioing in that the target was in sight. But even then, even with the Coast Guard plane doubling back and swooping overhead, Sammy had kept it together. There was always plan B: they'd change course again, they'd keep going, reverse and run, just like the manual said they should.

As far as Sammy was concerned, although the arrival of the Coast Guard wasn't great news, it wasn't a cause for too much concern. He was still safely navigating the no man's land of international waters while flying the red, white and blue of the Panamanian flag and still operating outside of any single nation's jurisdiction. But lines had been redrawn for this one; neither the Drug Enforcement Agency nor the Coast Guard was about to let my ship full of dope slip through their fingers. They worked too hard and too long for that.

In meeting after meeting they'd rehearsed the smuggler's possible evasive actions and how they would counter them. As well as the 148-strong crew aboard the Coast Guard cutter, they'd taken twenty armed DEA officers along for the ride. The ship they'd selected for the job, the *Boutwell*, was appropriately equipped for the task in hand, fitted with two 25mm machine guns with laser sights, a 76mm anti-aircraft gun and a state-of-the-art weapons system for firing tracers and shells. If the smugglers tried to run, they could catch them, if they panicked and decided to ram then the cutter's reinforced hull would stay solid.

By the time my call connected, the *Boutwell* had Sammy in range and had begun to tell him via the ship's radio to prepare to be boarded. Sammy's faith in the safety of international waters was shattered; the flag he was currently flying was Panamanian, and the exiled government of that country had acceded to the Coast Guard's request to use the stretch of ocean to ambush the smugglers and use whatever force it took to bring them down.

Sammy's message bounced off satellites, his voice echoing through the thousands of miles of

empty air between us. 'Michael, Michael, they're shooting at us.'

And sure enough, as Sammy held the satellite receiver at arm's length I heard the huge explosive splashes of 50-calibre anti-aircraft shells fired as warning shots just off the hull of *Encounter Bay*. The Coast Guard voice booming out over the radio was losing patience and began threatening to turn the sights on *Encounter Bay's* engine room. I heard Sammy's defiant announcement to the Coast Guard: 'I heard him yell into the radio, military to the end, 'The flag still flies and the city has not fallen.'

But the cause was lost and it would take far more than bravado to get out of this one. When Sammy asked what he should do next, I gave the only advice I could.

'Just . . . Just come back, Sam.'

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## CHAPTER ONE

# BECOMING THE FOX

**Itchy feet and a genetically inherited taste for adventure.**

With hindsight, the fact that I ended up heading a smuggling operation that made millions of dollars moving tons of weed around the world isn't so strange. In the years leading up to my first forays in the dope trade a number of disparate elements combined to make me ideally suited to the calling. I inherited a love of danger from my father, I developed a healthy disregard for authority at school which never left me, and I always loved to travel. On top of this I found myself unimpressed by the options open to me in the straight world, quickly tiring of the crappy jobs on offer and constantly searching for something, even if I wasn't sure at first what that something was.

I entered the world against the backdrop of a Europe at war. In March 1944 the skies over Britain, France and Germany raged, cities burned and fell as the bombs dropped and the bullets flew. The US alone dropped 30,176 tonnes of bombs on Germany and occupied Europe during over 20,000 missions in the month I was born. Hitler's bunker suicide and an Allied victory were still a year off, and Britain's young men were still giving their all for King and Country. One such man was my father, Squadron Leader Ernest Forwell, an experienced RAF fighter pilot, missing in action at the time of the birth of his only child having been shot down during a night-time Spitfire raid over enemy-occupied France. The Spitfire he was flying spun out of control, my father turned through hellish three sixties in the night sky and dark earth blurred into a whole mess of danger. With seconds to spare he ejected and deployed his parachute, floating serenely back to solid ground as he watched the plane explode into a ball of flame, lighting up the night sky for miles around. Somehow he managed to evade capture despite looking and sounding every inch the typical RAF flyboy sporting full uniform, flying jacket, clipped accent and handlebar moustache. He moved through France across country, stealing chickens and sleeping in hedges, avoiding the Nazis by travelling only at night. He was taken in and hidden by a French family who provided him with the forged papers he needed as a cover and clothes that wouldn't attract quite as much enemy attention as his RAF uniform. While there he met and befriended a New Zealand pilot who had also been shot down and both men stayed to fight with the resistance, my father not returning to Britain until the war ended in 1945.

As my father was surviving in occupied France, earning his Distinguished Flying Cross and his mention in dispatches, I screamed my first scream and settled into a life of what would soon become postwar privilege as the son of a hero. But that adventurous spirit inherent in the Forwell gene had not begun with my father. Way back when, at the turn of the twentieth century, my ancestor William. I

Forwell had written his 215-page opus, *A Thousand Mile Cruise In The 'Silver Clouds'*. The book provides an account of his journey from Dundee to France and back again in a small boat (the *Silver Clouds* of the title) and features evocative chapter headings such as 'The French Ladies – Paris Drinking' and 'Our Ship Sunk – Drowned in the Cabin'. I never met William Forwell, but I think I would have liked him.

My background was resolutely upper-middle class. My paternal grandparents owned rubber plantations in Malaysia and Singapore and growing up I'd often travel to visit them during school holidays. It was on these trips that I developed an enduring affection for South East Asia and was just as happy there as I ever was in England, which always seemed somewhat grey and tired on my return after a summer spent among the world's most laid-back people and – increasingly important to my restless teenage boy – its most beautiful women.

My father had stayed on in the RAF after the Allied victory. Once reunited on his return he and my mother, Jacqueline, moved to wherever he was stationed as he performed a number of tours of duty to the far-flung corners of the Far East and Asia. As well as spending holidays with my grandparents, I thought nothing of jumping on a plane to catch up with my parents and spending the weeks between school term time being indulged by my father and his comrades in arms, even being allowed to drive in the armoured vehicles and fire off their automatic machine guns.

With no brothers and sisters and having what was, compared to other children my age, an itinerant lifestyle, I turned into a self-sufficient young man, with little need for companionship and a growing awareness that, despite what others at home in England would have me believe, the world was a very small place, shrinking by the year.

When I was thirteen years old my parents moved me out of the school I was boarding at Knossington Grange in Rutland, and sent me to complete my education at Gordonstoun, an imposing seventeenth-century mansion set into 150 wild acres in Moray in the north of Scotland. My parents had saved hard to enable me to go to Gordonstoun and I was excited at first by the prospect of starting at this prestigious school. Famous as the institution responsible for educating future kings and princes, Gordonstoun's reputation is world-class. Prince Philip so enjoyed his own time at the school that he would later send his sons and partners in the family business, Charles, Edward and Andrew, to board there.

An odd crowd mix at Gordonstoun, the place acting as a catch-all for new and old money alike. As well as the British royal connection the school was chosen by David Bowie to educate his son Zowie; Sean Connery, one of Scotland's most famous exports, sent his son Jason there; and Balthazar Getty, great-grandson of the world's richest man, also passed through its hallowed halls as did countless others. The handmade Savile Row suits and stuffed shirts who ended up running this and many other countries. Fittingly enough, bearing in mind the Connery connection and the life of adventure I would soon embark upon, the school filled out the fictional back-story of another great British ducker and diver with a taste for the high life and a love of toys, one James Bond.

The regime at Gordonstoun soon highlighted my problem with authority. In those days, the school was strict; it had a set of punishments in place for infractions of their many rules and, me being me, soon fell foul of the system. Breaking the rules earned the miscreant what was called 'penalty drill'. Lasting for anything up to two hours, penalty drill took place at five o'clock on Saturday morning, while the rest of the school slept soundly and involved laps around a triangular patch of grass surrounded by a track on the school grounds, followed by a cold shower and a Dickensian breakfast of bread and dripping and a cup of tea. Pupils called for penalty drill were required to complete laps of the triangle, running around once and then walking them twice. The amount of time you were required to take part in this pointless pursuit depended on the crime committed. Towards the end of my time at Gordonstoun I could be found walking and running the triangle for the full two hours pretty much

every Saturday morning.

Another punishment doled out by the school was the silent walk to the nearby town, the hike to be completed alone and in silence; the time spent walking supposedly offering a chance for us to reflect on what we had done wrong. Again, I soon became very familiar with every bump in the road between the school and the town, using the time to dream of escape and adventure.

Corporal punishment was seldom administered at Gordonstoun, the cane being saved for those pupils who most exasperated the teaching staff and on whom the other punishments seemed to have little or no effect. I was picked out as one who might benefit from the administration of the cane after being accused of one infringement of school rules too many.

Despite its reputation as the school of the rich, Gordonstoun was far from ostentatious. The block stone buildings always seemed cold, even in the summer, but a hardy ruddy-cheeked demeanour and resistance to the elements was built up in the pupils by the weekday morning routine of a cross-country run through the grounds. Although academically the school was second to none, I never really excelled in the classroom. The education on offer was in the classical tradition, learning Latin by rote, studying ancient history and theology, subjects which seemed chosen to highlight my short attention span.

My time at Gordonstoun wasn't all doom and gloom though. I enjoyed sport, playing in the school rugby team and becoming school javelin champion. And there were other extracurricular activities that captured my imagination. The school actually ran its own corps of Sea Cadets and housed a fire engine that it was the pupils' duty to maintain and man, should fire break out in the vicinity.

The Gordonstoun school motto, written within a golden scroll beneath a rendering of a Viking ship in full sail, is *Plus est en vous*, which translates as 'there is more in you than you think', and I set out to prove it.

\*

By the time the sixties rolled around, my father had left the RAF and my parents were ready to escape the black and white kitchen sink austerity of postwar Britain and become 'ten pound poms', taking up the Australian government's offer of a £10 fare to emigrate to that brave new sunny world. Australia needed an influx to help the country reach its fast-growing economic potential, part of the 'populate or perish' policy. I happily finished my last term at Gordonstoun, packed up my school trunk and followed my mother and father to the new world.

On arriving in Australia I completed my education in Queensland on the north-eastern corner of the mainland, eventually managing to leave school with a respectable batch of eight O levels and a vague but insistent desire for travel and adventure. I had forged a few friendships at my new school, in particular embarking on a teenage love affair with a girl called Cheryl.

Despite hailing from a background cushioned by the dual safety nets of money and privilege, I was determined to find my own place in the world, and to do so without relying on my family to finance my entrée into adulthood. As soon as I left school my working life began in earnest following a skip across the Coral Sea to Papua New Guinea, where I began training as an electrical technician on the island's Lae Airfield, itself the scene of much wartime action. I learned quickly at my new post fitting aerials atop DC3s while roasting in the unforgiving sun, or sheltering from the ferocious monsoons that could blow up from nowhere.

Island life managed to capture my imagination for only a year, though, for by 1963 I was feeling the pull of the metropolis.

Winding up next in Sydney, I spent the following two years furthering my involvement in all things electrical (and indulging a growing fondness for *kit*, big boy's toys), working as a sound recordist and technician at local radio stations and film studios. I also enjoyed a brief tenure at the Post Office which, if nothing else, taught me how to type.

On a visit to my parents in 1965, I took a job on board the prawn boats, dodging crocodiles in the sweeping Gulf of Carpentaria off Australia's northern coast, and began a lifelong love of all things nautical. I did so well I was offered an apprenticeship by the South Australian Fishing Cooperative who had boats in the area, gaining nautical experience aboard their fleet of boats based in Port Arthur in Adelaide.

But a pattern was emerging. Soon I was beginning to feel the familiar itchy feet and headed back to Papua New Guinea, ostensibly to earn the money that would finance my travels on a wider scale. I had an idea that I wanted to see more of the world, and a well-paid job with few distractions would allow me to save the money I'd need for my dream trip.

My new employer was Kennecott Exploration who took me on as a surveyor's assistant and charged me with helping the conglomerate map the huge swathes of uncharted jungle that would soon prove host to the Ok Tedi copper mine. I was twenty-three years old. The environment I found myself working in for the next year was home to tribes only recently catalogued and filed by the prying anthropological eyes of the West. I witnessed first hand the several indigenous tribes, counting among their number the Head-Hunters, Mud-Men and the Cargo Cult. It was dangerous work; the Head-Hunters were believed to have once possessed cannibal tendencies, and the Cargo Cult had amassed a collection of weaponry scavenged from Second World War air-drops to the island. Neither group was particularly enamoured of its new visitors.

In 1967 I headed back to Queensland and for the first, but not final, time in my life went underground, working as a driller deep below the scorched earth in the copper mines of Mount Isa.

It was there that I met an American by the name of Cliff Ball. We became firm friends and began to make vague plans for a trip throughout South East Asia, an area still ravaged by the scorched earth conflict of the Vietnam War.

My parents meanwhile had settled into their life in the new country. My mother was living up to her nickname of 'The Duchess', throwing and attending parties and generally indulging her taste for fun and sociable frivolity. Dad had simpler tastes and was much happier with informal nights out in the local pub than at the dressy affairs Mum so enjoyed. Since I'd left home and started my wandering my father had taken up work as a bush pilot, finding the job the ideal opportunity to indulge his passion for aircraft. The work was often dangerous, the low-flying over inhospitable outback terrain calling for him to bring into play all the skills he had learned while flying fighter missions in the war. The distances involved for the pilots were immense as they carried farm labourers and supplies over thousands of miles of desolate bush land and dense rainforest. Often the ground was flooded and the pilots would find themselves navigating across newly formed lakes not charted on any map.

Sadly, my father's dangerous choice of occupation was to have tragic results. On 18 July 1967 he set off to take two stockmen back to the farm they worked in the Cape York Peninsula, making the trip in a small Cessna 172, a journey of over a thousand miles. Despite the fact that the weather was beginning to act up my father decided to go ahead with the journey anyway, fulfilling the bush pilot job description as a kind of outback taxi service. Somewhere deep within the Forwell gene there perhaps a predisposition to take risks regardless of the possible outcome of the venture. In this case the risk-taking was fatal. During the flight Dad found himself having to take off and gain altitude in the middle of what was by now an almighty thunderstorm in order to negotiate a mountain range. The plane couldn't climb fast enough to clear the terrain and he and his passengers crashed into the side of a mountain in the middle of a tropical forest.

The news that the father I idolized so much had died in an air crash came as an awful blow, which shocked and saddened me to my very core. To my eyes, Dad had always seemed larger than life, a heroic figure whose bravery, humour and compassion marked him out from every other man I had ever met. I just couldn't believe he was dead. What made the event harder to take was the fact that

because of the inhospitable nature of the terrain he worked and the sheer scale of the distance involved, it took almost a full year to locate the crash site, which was by then a half-overgrown selection of barely recognizable plane parts. The pin my father wore on his uniform, a pair of metal wings sprouting from the side of a crest, showed the horror of the crash in miniature; it had been bent almost into a circle while he was still wearing it by the force of the crash. The only saving grace was the news from the investigators at the crash site that the accident would have happened so quickly and been so ferocious that the men aboard the plane would have known little or nothing about it.

My father's fatal accident temporarily quenched my desire for the dangerous work that was becoming my stock in trade. As a result I slipped down a gear and rather than return to the work at the mine I stayed at home, near to the mother with whom I shared the awful burden of grief. But my thrill-seeking drive hadn't gone for ever: I still used some of the cash I had saved to buy myself the two-seater sports car that became the first in a long line of fast white motors.

After a few months I was ready to hit the road again with little more than my cocked thumb and stubborn resolve to find adventure and, perhaps in the process, myself. I spent the next three years hitchhiking around South East Asia, wandering through a war zone and picking up cash wherever the opportunity to do so presented itself. I managed to make my meagre travel budget of \$250 stretch for eighteen months. During the course of the road trip to nowhere I felt the streets of Saigon rumble beneath the tracks of American tanks and suffered fuck-you-for-not-fighting abuse from the American soldiers who mistook me for a hippie trail peacenik. But the GIs had me all wrong, marking me as protesting against a war I knew very little about.

Arriving in the Maldivé Islands I collected live seashells for a marine biologist and elsewhere found casual work as a barman and waiter wherever and whenever I found it in order to eke out my existence as the solitary traveller. In Singapore I put on a wetsuit and worked as a salvage diver, after which I returned to Sydney.

This was the sixties, the decade we hear so much about – Vietnam, Hendrix, Woodstock and free love man, – a decade that apparently touched and changed anyone lucky enough to have lived through it. In cities all around the world freethinking radicals were turning on, tuning in and dropping out with the help of the illegal substances that I would eventually move around the globe. But my experience of the time was markedly at odds with those of others who were there. I didn't even know what a hippie was, and certainly wouldn't have numbered myself among them. The counter-cultural revolution passed me by and probably wouldn't have excited much interest in me even if I had been aware of it.

My sixties were spent building up a dissolute CV of jobs taken wherever I happened to end up on my open-ended wanderings. Not that I was always alone. My journey through the dust and heat of South East Asia often meant sharing parts of my trek with similar adventure seekers. I embarked on the trip I'd planned with Cliff Ball. At one point during our wanderings through Vietnam and Cambodia we were lost in the middle of nowhere without food or water and suffering on the seemingly never-ending Cambodian sand-track from the crippling effects of the heat, which refused to let up even at night. At the side of one of the unmarked roads criss-crossing that part of the world, we came across a peasant shack built on stilts, a type of dwelling typical of that area.

The sun had long dropped though the fierce heat remained and by now we were hungry, hot and desperate, ready to try anything as we approached the humble shack. Cliff rapped on the door while I began babbling in loud English about our dire needs and peaceful intentions. After a few minutes of this desperate pantomime the makeshift wooden door swung inward to reveal a beautiful young Cambodian female amid the bare-bones minimalism of the peasant home. We accepted the girl's invitation to enter and not until the door had closed shut behind us did we notice her fiery-eyed father hiding behind it, armed and ready to swing at these strange nocturnal visitors, a hatchet raised high in his right hand. Quick thinking and a further babble of panicked pleas across the language barrier



illustrated with manic hand gestures and pleading eyes calmed our suspicious host to the extent that he soon relented and began to share with us his meagre resources, even offering us his daughter as a parting gift.

We refused of course, and left the old man a transistor radio as a thank you token, a simple act of gratitude that brought tears to his eyes. But the incident had cemented in my mind the divisions of culture you can't show on a map, differences that run deeper and further than mere geographic distance.

Back in Australia, I did what was expected of me and decided to settle down. I swapped the shorts and backpack of the free spirit for the businessman's collar and tie in order to become head commercial salesman for B&D Roll-A-Door, Australia's largest producer of modular garage units. I dealt with the firm's larger corporate clients, mainly builders and property developers, living the nine-to-five life of a working stiff. I even took the plunge and got married to my high-school sweetheart Cheryl.

I was actually good at my job, but after four years of suburban life, four years of sales conferences and team targets and a future stretching predictably in front of me, I couldn't fake it any longer. The fate stepped in and I was offered a new job in Western Australia. I took the job and my itchy feet hit the road once again, this time leaving Cheryl and the last four years behind. The marriage ended amicably and uneventfully as it had progressed. Four years with me, particularly in view of my recent history, would have armed my wife with the expectation that one day I would move on.

For a while I threw myself into my new post, although the job held little real interest for me. My duties revolved mainly around helping to import radios and cigarette lighters from China, learning the process the ins and outs of the paperwork and arrangements required to ship goods overseas, knowledge that would later prove invaluable. The two million lighters my new employer imported turned out to be so cheaply made and unstable that they could only safely be half filled with fuel, lest the pressure of air travel release their explosive potential. In order to shift the imported lighters my boss and I took offices on a weekend let and began wholesaling the goods. Unfortunately the lighters were so dangerous that as soon as they hit the Australian market, they were banned.

Of course the job didn't last. One year and a few hundred thousand lighters later I began to feel again, that pull, that nagging desire for the next horizon, for something, *anything* else. I was thirty-two years old and I'd tried the world of legitimate business and found it severely wanting. Now I gave once more to the thirst for adventure that was as natural and vital to me as breathing.

I cashed in my savings, left the job in Perth and set off again with a job lot of Chinese transistor radios bought from my now ex-boss to sell along the way in search of my future, a future which soon turned up in the unlikely shape of a mysterious American called Robert Lietzman.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### 1976. ROBERT LIETZMAN

A moonlight flit and an introduction  
to the dope trade.

I'd used a portion of my savings to invest in a caravan, a rugged V8 utility vehicle, plus some fishing rods, a Pink Floyd tape and a collection of the outdoorsman paraphernalia I thought I may just find use for on my newest venture. The plan was to indulge the taste for the road I'd developed hitchhiking through South East Asia with an extended solo trip around Australia's 2,941,299 square miles – just me and my batch of radios for company, points of interest and planned stops t.b.c.

Leaving Perth, I headed north along the coast road keeping the sun to my left and the windows fully rolled down and my shirt sleeves rolled up to compensate for the lack of air-con in the vehicle.

By now the 1970s were in full swing and King Disco's crown was slipping. On the other side of the world, in the New York and London demi-monde, punk rock had begun its snarling assault on popular culture. The Sex Pistols, The Clash and a host of others were spearheading the movement, looking the established social order dead in the eye and daring, in the face of economic depression and social hypocrisy, to ask *why*. The social phenomenon beginning in the cities and spreading quickly through the dry tinderstick suburbs encouraged anyone who would listen that self-expression and a maverick spirit were more valid and vital than blind allegiance to a failing, unfair system, and that in order to move forward as a whole, we first had to take on the challenge as individuals. Robert Lietzman didn't know it, and he sure as hell didn't look it, but he was punk rock through and through.

I first met Lietzman in the summer of 1976 in the quiet Australian port of Geraldton, the latest stop on my V8-powered walkabout, 420 kilometres from my start point. Geraldton was beautiful; it had begun life as a small mining and farming town and served briefly as a convict settlement, but its idyllic Indian Ocean beaches and temperate climate soon ensured its standing as a popular tourist stop. Beneath the picture perfect waters off its coast lay clues to the town's nautical history in the decaying old wrecks of Dutch merchant ships run aground centuries previously on the shore's protective reef. The nearby Abrolhos Islands, 60 kilometres to the west, were the site of the area's most infamous historical event, the famed attempted hijack and mutiny aboard the *Batavia* in 1629, which had ended when the ship struck the reef and forty people fell beneath the surf and drowned.

By 1976 Geraldton had become a popular spot for surfers working their way around the circuit and bringing with them their own brand of sun-bleached bohemia in the never-ending search for the perfect wave. The laid-back feel of the small town made it the ideal spot for me to park up my caravan and unwind after my recent adventures in the real world of the working week, and I was soon so taken

with the place that I decided to stay awhile.

After asking around I found part-time work and pocket money serving behind the bar of the local pub and set about serving and meeting locals and tourists alike. In Australia at the time my story was not unusual, men like me were drifting through towns like Geraldton every day, hitching rides on boats and in cars to and from the small port and picking up whatever work they could find before heading off again on their merry way. Some travelled in groups of three or four in the favoured Volkswagen Kombi vans, usually complete with a roof rack full of psychedelically decorated surfboards, then the de rigueur accessory on young Australia's rites of passage tour.

The pub where I found work happened to be the very one in which the unknowing spirit of punk rock, Robert Lietzman, liked to pass the time while land-locked. As I began my first shift, emptying ashtrays and cleaning glasses, a man entered the pub and took a stool at the bar. So far he was my first and only customer,

'Bourbon,' he ordered in an American accent. 'With Coke.'

'Coming right up,' I said with a friendly smile.

He looked coolly back. 'You new here?'

'Yeah, just arrived. My name's Mike.'

'Uh huh. You English?'

'Yeah.'

'So what's an Englishman doing in Geraldton?' He shook a Marlboro from his pack and stuck it between his lips.

'Oh just – shit!' I yelled, stumbling back as he pulled out a familiar-looking lighter and thumbed it, expecting an explosion, flaming paraffin, third-degree burns.

'What the fuck!' He was gapping at me over the innocent blue flame.

So I told him about the Chinese lighters, not a career highlight, and my decision to pack it all in and go travelling. And he told me about his beloved boat, the *Diana*, a fifty-foot trimaran that he was single-handedly navigating around the world. Trimarans, he told me in a dotting tone of voice, are fast, strong and reliable. The lightweight boat consisted of two smaller outlying hulls connected to the central main hull via lateral struts.

'I'm Lietzman,' he said, reaching over to shake hands. I'd obviously passed some kind of test.

I soon noticed that unlike most of the regulars who congregated at the pub, Lietzman always drank alone. He was a big tipper; keeping his drink topped up and being ready to listen while he worked his way through his never-ending list of gripes could double my evening's pay. This rangy, sparsely built American had a way of talking that seemed to just drag you in to the easy, half-whispered narrative. The two of us would quietly set the world to rights from our respective positions behind and in front of the pub's makeshift wooden bar.

About ten years my senior, Lietzman was tall and lean, with short brown hair he'd push back from his tanned face while talking or listening or just watching. Sartorially he went for an eccentric mix and match approach, favouring belted drip-dry polyester slacks in grey or brown, often slightly too short for him but with an immaculate stitched-in crease, which he would team with faded blue slip-on moccasins, odd socks and whichever clean polo shirt he'd found that morning. He looked like a country and western singer on a golfing holiday. Everything about the man seemed to scream outside the box, albeit very quietly.

I saw the mysterious loner I met in that bar as something of a kindred spirit, and although – perhaps because – Lietzman didn't say much, the pair of us clicked immediately. I liked his stories of the sea and the way he told them. One of the first admirable characteristics I noted in him was his immense capacity for his beloved bourbon. The man could drink the stuff all day long and yet never seemed to suffer any ill effects. Indeed, it was his fondness for sipping whisky, in particular that loving

produced at the Jack Daniel's distillery in Lynchburg, Tennessee, that earned Lietzman his nickname among those few who knew him well. Whether downing his first shot or emptying his second bottle of 'Bourbon' always seemed somehow in control, always aware of his surroundings yet never fully part of them, a rock-steady study in seen-it-all-before detachment.

You knew just by looking in his eyes that Lietzman had a razor-sharp intelligence, and the balls to back his hunches. But, clever or not, he would not suffer fools gladly, was stubbornly difficult to get along with – playfulness and joviality formed no part of his character repertoire whatsoever. Drunk or sober, he was a serious dude.

Throughout the opening act of our blossoming friendship I found myself chipping away at the facade of his personality every bit as hard as I had in the mines way below Mount Isa. Even at the parties we went to in Geraldton peopled by locals, tourists and surf bums, soundtracked by the new Rolling Stones album *Black and Blue* or Queen's drawn-out 'Bohemian Rhapsody', which seemed to be playing everywhere that summer, Lietzman would sit apart from the throng, happily ensconced on the edge of the action nursing his bourbon and eyeing the scene before him with a noncommittal, aloof air. Often, I got the feeling that it was what Lietzman wasn't saying that held the key to unlock his inscrutable character.

'You see, Michael, once you've been to sea nothing's ever the same again,' he said, swirling the ice cubes in his drink and taking a long pull on his Marlboro. 'Out on a boat you keep your country with you, you make your own laws and keep your own counsel. It's one of the only places left in the world where you can call yourself a free man and mean it. Seems to me you're the kind of guy who appreciate that.'

My ears immediately pricked up as Lietzman leaned across the bar, always seemingly on guard against being overheard even if we were the only two people in the room. His journey had hit a temporary snag he told me, while the *Diana*, currently in a sad state of repair in dry dock, underwent necessary maintenance. Unforeseen circumstances had conspired to put a halt to his travels, hence his short-lived stay in Geraldton.

There was obviously more to the story – there always was with Lietzman – but for the moment at least he wasn't prepared to divulge his secrets, and I was happy to ignore them. He asked me if I cared to help get the boat in order, perhaps park my caravan up at the boatyard and lend a hand in her renovation when I wasn't working at the bar. I agreed, and set about learning the workings of the boat in close-up, helping out as much as my limited experience would allow and generally enjoying the weather and the company.

Lietzman then added to his air of mystery by suddenly disappearing. Somewhat bemused, I decided to hang around Geraldton anyway, and Lietzman was gone just long enough for his absence to feel like an impromptu holiday, and more like what it was. My suspicions were confirmed when I was taken to one side by the boatyard owner.

'Hey, Michael, how long were you intending to stay here in Geraldton?'

'I hadn't given it too much thought. Why do you ask?'

He passed me a cold beer from the cooler, took one for himself and we both popped them as we watched a group of surfers stroll by, headed for the beach.

'Well, it's not me that's asking. Bourbon's in a little trouble, he's being held for questioning in Melbourne.'

I thought it wiser not to ask why, and listened as his proposition was relayed to me via the intermediary.

'They'll almost definitely grant him bail, though, so he should be back here in around a couple weeks. The boat should be ready to go by then and he'll be taking off pretty much straight away. He's gonna need someone to crew for him. You interested?'

Yep, I was interested.

On his return to Geraldton, Lietzman was tight-lipped about his absence, and if he didn't care to divulge the reasons behind his temporary incarceration, then I wasn't going to press him on the subject. While he was away I had managed to offload the last of my Chinese radios and was beginning to tire of life in the caravan. Australia had started to feel small to me by now, the lure of the outback waning. The prospect of joining Lietzman and hitching a ride to anywhere on his boat was becoming more attractive with each bourbon I poured. Maybe it was his tales of the sea, or perhaps it was the way he told them, or maybe it was just that I didn't want the conversation to end, but all Robert Lietzman had to do was say the word.

Lietzman was eager to move on. His bail would not last for ever and his scheduled court appearance would certainly have resulted in a prison term. I knew he needed to get away, but although we spent our spare hours working side by side to make the *Diana* seaworthy, and most evenings in the bar listening to tinny FM rock on the last Chinese radio, there was still one little talk we had not yet had. What he neglected to tell me in those early conversations was that he smuggled marijuana for a living.

Lietzman's involvement in the Australian dope trade went way back. Specifically, he had been running loads of weed from Thailand into Australia aboard the *Diana* and despite starting out strictly as an amateur had, until pretty recently, been doing it successfully. His run of good luck had bottomed out though, in the midst of a sting operation set up by the Australian authorities. He'd spent a couple of months in the holding cells, dodging the drug squad's questions for as long as he could until through some nifty legal manoeuvring he finally secured a release on bail, a circumstance he fully intended to capitalize on.

Lietzman had originally wanted a crew of two to accompany him on the next leg of his voyage and asked me if I could possibly recruit the second crew member. I duly asked around the few contacts I had made in town but had no luck in finding an extra pair of hands for our planned voyage. It was, I seemed, destined to be just the two of us.

The date we were to leave Australia was set. I began cutting the few cords that bound me to my life on the open road in outback Australia, phoned my mother and said I may be away for a while, and threw myself wholeheartedly into this new caper, wherever it was to take me.

I had sold my car, my caravan and my fishing equipment and the few possessions I had been travelling with and embarked on a new adventure with the proceeds safely stashed in my travelling bag, an envelope of cash containing just over three thousand Australian dollars. I was instructed to meet my new captain for a midnight rendezvous at a nearby secluded beach that Lietzman had selected as our departure point. The owner of the boatyard had come through with the food and basic provisions that we would need on our journey and soon, beneath a full moon on calm seas, the *Diana* was ready to sail.

'Welcome aboard, Mike. I hope you've said your last goodbyes to Australia; you may not see this place again for a while.'

I knew, but didn't care, that we would be bypassing official immigration and customs on the trip and apart from neglecting to load in the new battery that Lietzman had asked for, I did precisely what was asked of me. The battery problem came to light once he had made his final checks aboard the boat and attempted to start her engine.

'There's no power, Mike. You installed the new battery, right?'

I hadn't. Rather than lose his temper though, Lietzman merely phoned the boatyard owner and had him locate a working battery for us that we then duly fitted.

'Okay, Mike, take two.'

The battery problem had put the scheduled midnight launch back until dawn and there was enough light for me to see the coastline shrink in the distance as we headed out to sea. It would be many years

before I would again travel to Australia under my own name. As far as Australian passport control knew, Michael Forwell, a British citizen whose parents had emigrated to the country in the late fifties had entered but never left. As far as they're concerned, I might still be there.

It didn't even occur to me that by embarking on a journey with a man who was wanted and on the run, I had stepped up to the line that separated me from illegality. Soon, I would take a decent run up and leap right over it. Years later I read that my hooking up with Lietzman was one of the defining moments in the Thai dope trade. At the time, it felt like anything but.

\*

A good way to get to know someone very well very fast is to sail with them. The *Diana* was a comfortable boat but she wasn't huge, and the close proximity Lietzman and I shared on that short journey served to cement our unlikely friendship and foreshadowed many of the high jinks we would take part in for the next decade. The journey was quiet, we bonded in mutual silence, happy to live an almost monk-like existence in our cramped environment.

By the time we had sailed past Christmas Island we were working smoothly together. I had proved myself a fast learner and an able seaman, and Lietzman was obviously pleased with me as his choice of crew. It was while sailing the Indian Ocean en route to Singapore that we felt the dynamic between the two of us shift slightly but crucially, and soon, rather than working *for* the American (despite the lack of anything like wages) I began to feel I was working *with* him as an equal. It was in this spirit that Lietzman finally confided in me.

Now I learned the reason for his arrest. I can't say I felt too surprised, although I genuinely hadn't thought too much about it. But a man who owns a boat, has recently spent time as a guest of the Melbourne constabulary and just absconded while on bail is likely to be smuggling something. Lietzman also told me that thanks to his arrest he was financially somewhat embarrassed; that is to say, he was totally flat broke, unable even to pay the money he still owed on his chandlery bills back in Geraldton.

But Robert Lietzman was used to being backed into a corner and all was not lost. He had a plan, I said, a foolproof method of turning the last of my ready cash, the three thousand Australian dollars that I was carrying, into a healthy return, doubling my money with sugar on top. I was no gambler, but a return like that had at least to be worth a look. Lietzman needed money to get back in the dope game to get started up again, and I had it. In that simple equation lay the seeds of a partnership that would last for just under ten years and result in us earning millions of dollars moving boatloads of dope to an enthusiastic Stateside market.

Even with my limited exposure to the world of the weed, I knew that trafficking in the stuff held the distinct possibility of real and specific dangers. But Lietzman was very persuasive. The plan he suggested to me had worked for him before, and it would work again.

The advantages of smuggling Thai dope were sold to me as far outweighing the dangers. The market we were tapping into was huge; there were estimated to be almost twenty million regular pot smokers in America by the mid seventies, but the trade supplying many of them had yet to attract the undivided attention of an experienced official body dedicated to stopping it. The American Central Tactical Units (CENTAC) set up by the DEA to specifically target high-level narcotics smuggling were barely a year old and still concentrating mainly on the trade in the Class A drugs heroin and cocaine. The DEA itself had only been in operation for three years since President Nixon oversaw its formation in 1973 when it took over the duties of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, and its 1,470 officers had their hands full attempting to stop the tidal wave of violence that accompanied the burgeoning South American cocaine trade.

At the same time as Lietzman and I were sailing the *Diana* to Singapore, over in Colombia Pablo Escobar and his contemporaries, the Ochoa brothers, Carlos Lehder and Jose Rodriguez Gacha, were beginning to build empires on the profits they were amassing by smuggling first marijuana and then cocaine over the borders. By comparison to what the Colombians had planned for the decade ahead the dope that Lietzman and I were about to start moving was a drop in the ocean.

Cocaine was becoming big news in America and for a while it seemed that everybody was doing it. There were no reliable figures charting how much white powder was being smuggled into America at the time, but demand was growing at a staggering rate within the generation that followed the burnout of the summers of love. In 1975, the year before Lietzman and I met, American authorities had estimated that five to six hundred kilos of coke per year were being snorted up American noses, a figure that underwent a radical rethink when Cali police stumbled across a single shipment of some 600 kilos aboard a plane headed for Miami.

In the same year, President Ford's Domestic Council Drug Abuse Task Force, chaired by Vice President Rockefeller, claimed that 'all drugs are not equally dangerous. Enforcement efforts should therefore concentrate on drugs which have a high addiction potential. . .'<sup>1</sup> Their report went on to claim that the use of marijuana was not a major domestic problem and that resources were better employed in attempting to crack the trade in hard drugs.

The trade in cocaine pulled in far more cash than moving dope, a single kilo of coke in America selling for up to forty thousand dollars while weed went for between one and two thousand dollars per pound. The huge profits on offer proved irresistible to men such as Escobar and his contemporaries - men who preferred money to adventure and established early on a rule of unmitigated sensation and violence in order to safeguard their share of the burgeoning new market. So the authorities were looking the other way, focusing the bulk of their efforts southwards and giving Lietzman and me the room we needed to manoeuvre. If we were sensible and careful, Lietzman's reasoning went, if we kept a cool head and our mouths shut, then all would be well. And who knows, we may even enjoy it.

It was still no duck walk. The coast was far from clear for potential smugglers intending on getting their product into the US from South East Asia, but customs and DEA attention was far more likely to be concentrated on the so-called Golden Triangle, the point where Laos, Thailand, Burma and Vietnam overlap and where a huge percentage of the world's heroin was cultivated and grown in the form of opium poppies. Steering clear of the area as much as possible was a must.

Frank Lucas, the superfly so-called 'Haint of Harlem', had revolutionized the heroin trade in New York in the late sixties and early seventies by visiting the source of the heroin and negotiating to buy his product direct from the producers in the Golden Triangle. In the process he cut out rogue elements in the Mob who had controlled much of the trade up to that point. Once his deal was done in Asia, Lucas got his trademark 'Blue Magic' smack into America hidden in the GI coffins flown into Fort Bragg. Designated to bring home the remains of the unfortunates killed in action in Vietnam via United States Air Force landing strips, the fix was in with enough members of the military at all levels to make sure the coffins containing the heroin were waved through with no questions asked. When Frank was finally taken down, he made a deal for a reduction in his sentence. Frank Lucas's testimony was directly responsible for the indictment and conviction of almost three-quarters of the New York law enforcement officers who were charged with corruption and drugs charges. There is very little black and white in the world of drug smuggling, and an awful lot of grey.

By the time we hit Singapore me and my three grand were in, though there had been no conscious decision on my part to join the ranks of the criminal class, no initiation ceremony, no more dramatic than a toast and a handshake. My decision to go along with Lietzman's plan was driven far more by a desire to keep the adventure going and see where it led.

My own personal experience of cannabis was minimal. I'd smoked it once on my travels which

travelling economy class as deck cargo, also, ironically, en route to Singapore, when I had fallen in for the duration of the journey with a group of bong-toting hippies. I thought it looked like fun and was tempted by the merits of an expanded consciousness as outlined by our new and very stoned hippie friends, but was still less than sure. In the end I decided to have a go, but a couple of hits and a mild case of the dizzy giggles were enough to convince me that smoking pot wasn't for me, and despite going on to make millions of dollars moving the stuff around the world, I would stick with the booze and the nicotine and never smoke weed again.

Back on board the *Diana* and invigorated now by a fresh sense of purpose, Lietzman and I sailed from Singapore to Phuket, where we moored the boat. Then we flew to Bangkok and Lietzman hit the phone, showing for the first time his feel for the deal, his quick and ready skills in the quiet art of dope negotiation.

'Okay, Michael, lesson one. This is important so never forget it. When you're doing business over the phone always call from a number that can't be traced back to you. Public call boxes are best. Phones in bars and hotels are okay too, so long as it's in the lobby, not in your room.'

'Call boxes. Right. Got it.' I nodded.

'Always carry a pocketful of phone change and wherever and whenever possible, always use code. Assume from this point on that every call you make is being monitored, whether it's about dope or not.'

'Right. Call-change, code, and permanent phone paranoia. Got it.'

Standing back and watching my friend pull the thing together only deepened the respect I felt for Lietzman, and further convinced me of his expertise and experience as a smuggler.

Once Lietzman had made the call we returned to our hotel room and waited for our supplier to visit. Lietzman's wholesale connection was named Kamol, a local Thai would-be gangster currently supplementing his income by working as a tour guide. Kamol arrived ten minutes later and was not what I expected at all. The man standing in our hotel room in sandals, bright-red Adidas shorts and a multicoloured Hawaiian shirt and accepting a glass of Johnny Walker had one of the broadest, most infectious smiles I had ever seen, and it seemed he was in a position to help us.

'I can happily provide what you are searching. You come to right guy. Many falangs go to wrong man and lose out big-time. You pay money and I find sticks for you, best in Thailand, as many sticks as you have dollars. We drink to business now, yes?'

Cheers.

In those early days, the dope we ran came in the now outmoded shape of Buddha sticks. Buddha sticks are hardly ever seen now; in the dope game as in any other, fashions come and go, and Buddha sticks have long since gone the way of flared trousers and kaftans. In America the customers liked the sticks; it was what set Thai dope apart from that which was being smuggled into America from Mexico and South America. Thai sticks cost more on the street but for good reason – the quality was better, they provided a smoother, longer-lasting high, and weed wrapped around bamboo was a sure sign that anything sold as Thai weed was the real thing. A public warning had been issued regarding Thai sticks when the DEA was just a year old following a Hawaiian bust in 1974, but their cautionary tale didn't have quite the effect they were hoping for. When a DEA spokesman claimed that Thai sticks were three times stronger than domestic or South American weed, stoners' ears all over America pricked up and the demand for genuine Thai was assured for years to come.

The sticks took the form of leaves of marijuana wrapped around a four-inch length of bamboo, wholesaling from the source at ten sticks to a brick. The new form of a very old drug had made its first appearance in America with the arrival home of soldiers from the Vietnam War, soldiers who had acquired a taste for the potent strain of weed on tours of duty in South East Asia.

Kamol would deliver the pot at a price of fifty dollars a pound. We were paying over the odds and



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