

WHILE IN DARKNESS THERE IS LIGHT

**Idealism and Tragedy on
an Australian Commune**

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**with a foreword by
HOWARD DEAN**



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*Gather ye rosebuds while you may,
Old time is still a flying,
And that same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.*

—Robert Herrick
from the Rosebud Farm journal

CHAPTER 1

Laos, September 1974

*The permanent temptation of life is to confuse dreams with reality.
The permanent defeat in life comes when dreams are surrendered to reality.*

—James A. Michener
from Harry Reynolds's journal

The ferryboat sputtered down the Mekong, a high-pitched whir of cicadas challenging the drone of its engine. The wet season had just ended, and the banks along the Mekong River rose twenty feet above the silty water. Lush thickets brushed the shores of Thailand and rice paddies greened the hillsides of Laos. Crumbling shoreline barely held back the encroaching jungle, where locals believed every tree held a ghost. Pale trunks, gray and twisted, loomed forty feet above into a canopy that blocked the sun. In the distance, granite mountains ascended above verdant hills.

Charlie Dean, one hand on the camera looped around his neck, looked over the gunwale into the water, hoping to spot a catfish—some were reputed to weigh five hundred pounds. At the muddy water's edge, a woman stood

knee-deep and dipped her laundry, clapped the red cloth between brown hands, dipped again. Nearby, children splashed and one boy urinated into the stream. A woman lowered a cup into the slow current, raised it to her lips and sipped. A water buffalo made his way to the river and dropped his head to drink. Charlie had read that the Mekong originates deep within the Tibetan Plateau and spills 2,600 miles south and east to the South China Sea. The checkered rice fields and tributaries that fed into the waterway were home to more than fifty million people. The river was their artery, their life's blood.

The air steamed and Charlie's shirt stuck to his sun-tanned back. He was three inches shy of six feet and drew his knees to his chest under the ferryboat's rickety cabin to make room for the other *farangs*—the Lao word for foreigner. The wooden hull was long and slender, the keel shallow to avoid bottom. While the *farangs* chattered and shifted position, a dozen Laotians sat absolutely still in the bow. When anyone moved, the boat rocked and changed course slightly. One mother curled her arm around a young boy and scanned the riverbank, watching. Every day she and her son remained in Laos put them in jeopardy. Although a peace treaty had been signed the previous year, civil war was still raging. The communist Pathet Lao, guided by North Vietnam, ordered village women to sew uniforms and took their children to serve as couriers. Men were snatched from the fields and sent to fight. Anyone who spoke out was shot. Charlie felt an unspoken tension in the boat, as if there would be serious consequences to pay if something went wrong.

His stomach was growing queasy from the engine's growling and exhaust fumes. He glanced at Neil, the Australian journalist Charlie had met in Darwin on his way to Thailand. Neil was just barely twenty-one, and it wasn't hard to convince him to take a leave from his newspaper job

for a bit of sightseeing in Southeast Asia. The Aussie was a decent companion, a good bloke.

In a few more hours they were expected to arrive in Thakhek, where they would decide whether to move on to Nepal or head back to Australia. Charlie had mixed feelings about leaving Laos. He had spent the last six years speaking against America's actions in Southeast Asia, and during the past months in Australia his political vision had been hammered into a personal, spiritual fire. He knew he couldn't single-handedly settle the problems of these people whose lives had been so long tied up in warfare, but he could offer them the peace he carried in his heart. He had convinced himself that his sense of peace protected him from peril, even during his two weeks in the Khmer Republic where every night he heard the *wahump, wahump, wahump* of artillery being fired across the Mekong. Phnom Penh's sidewalks were crowded with Laotian refugees escaping the communists. The city streets, lined with trees and sidewalk cafes, were cluttered with sandbags, barbed wire, and American military supplies. Charlie had no doubt that the U.S. was still involved.

It was hard to believe that a land so beautiful could be torn by such strife. Charlie and Neil had climbed around limestone caves and swum through clear green pools into grottos covered with moss and ferns. Outside massive and exquisite temples, they watched monks glide in flowing orange robes through courtyards glittering with smiling Buddhas. Slim, slit-skirted women of Vientiane made them propositions. They ate croissants and drank strong French coffee in a decrepit café, its green walls smudged with dirt. Sitting in front of a whirling prop fan, they read the *Bangkok Post* while a lizard crawled across the ceiling.

When they had reached Paksan, a woman offered the two travelers mats on the floor of her one-room house.

Like most Laotians, she lived at subsistence level, eating only what she grew and could barter for in the village. She pointed to her mouth to ask if the young men were hungry, and Charlie nodded. He and Neil had not had much but *khao*—rice—since they left Bangkok several days earlier. While she went outside and lit the kerosene burner, the children watched the bearded strangers in scruffy clothing. Charlie rummaged in his pack. Inside was an envelope of candle-fruit nuts he planned to mail back to Rosebud Farm, where he had spent the last year. The fatty seed inside the shell was said to provide lamp oil, and Rosebud might be able to cultivate the tree. There was a letter from his brother Howard saying he had applied to medical school. Charlie was glad Howard had found his calling. In a pocket of the pack, he found a square of fabric that a Rosebud girl, Gayle, had embroidered and given him to sew onto his jeans. He had watched her fashion the paw-paw fruit, his favorite treat, at night by candlelight, making tiny French knots with black thread for the seeds. Even before she gave him the patch, he knew she was sweet on him. When he left, she made him swear to come back, and he had given his promise.

There were letters from Harry Reynolds and Kim Haskell, old boarding school friends with whom he had lived at Rosebud. Kim had founded Rosebud and had taught him to make commitments driven by passion, to live spontaneously and without apprehension, and it was those lessons that led him to Laos.

From the bowels of his pack Charlie unearthed his camera—a pricey single-lens reflex. He checked the film—still several shots left. Waving the children closer together, he framed them in the viewfinder and the girl and her brothers grinned for a couple of pictures.

The woman brought in two bowls of noodle soup with fish sauce, and the children sat quietly while the men

ate. Charlie felt a stab of guilt and wondered if there would be enough for the youngsters that night. When the bowls were empty, the woman presented her opium pipe, offering a smoke. Charlie hoped she would not take offense when he declined her offer. She lit the pipe for herself. When he lay down, Charlie felt the mat soften as the sweet smoke settled over him. He thought how Laos was one of the least-developed countries on earth, and yet it had plenty of natural resources and a culture uncorrupted by capitalism. The people were gracious and kind. If Laos could resolve its conflicts, it stood a good chance of making something of itself. Charlie was twenty-four and roiling with ideas. He believed in basic human goodness—maybe he could find a way to help.

From the bow of the ferryboat, a lullaby—*Non saa laa*—sleep, my child, the mother sang. Charlie wondered about the children in Paksan, whether they would survive the civil war. The boys had reminded him of his own brothers. With any luck, he would be back home on Park Avenue by Christmas.

The boat drifted to the riverbank and stopped. Certainly they weren't in Thakhek yet.

Neil nudged Charlie. "Pathet Lao checkpoint," he said.

Several brown-skinned men motioned for the passengers to disembark, and Charlie was grateful for a chance to stretch his legs. The men were wearing Cooley caps shaped like wide cones, and each had a machine gun strapped to his back. They looked like a gang of teenagers. When Charlie lifted the camera and snapped a picture, one of the men laid his hand on the barrel of the gun behind him. With the other hand, he reached for the camera.

Charlie had taken some shots of scenery along the Mekong on the film, beautiful temples of Phnom Penh, the Paksan children. He had bought the camera in Japan, the

first big expenditure of his life. The camera had kept a visual record of the two months he spent in Japan and the year he had lived at Rosebud Farm. He would not give up the camera.

“*Bo*,” Charlie said and shook his head. “*Bo* camera.”

The machine gun suddenly swung from behind the man, rose to his shoulder, pointed at Charlie’s chest. The man was yelling, but Charlie had no idea what he was saying. He shoved Charlie, pushing him away from the boat and into the forest. He twisted his neck and saw the passengers board the ferry again. The mother, hand on her son’s back, went to the bow. As the boat left the shore, she looked at Charlie and mouthed the words *pai dee*—go in peace.

Neil stumbled behind Charlie, a cone-capped man gripping his arm. Charlie peered into the gloomy thicket in front of him and thought of the Laotian expression, “When the tiger sleeps, don’t wake him.” But it was too late—he had awakened the tiger.