

Pipe Dreams

Saigon, April 1966:

The noise and confusion of afternoon traffic enveloped Sebastian Baxingdale as the trishaw took him from the Chinese opium den in Cholon to Rue Catinat. The pleasurable after-effects of four pipes lingered still. The thring-thring of bicycle and trishaw bells sounded like the tintinnabulation of Eastern music. The rocking movement of the vehicle lulled him. Vietnamese women floated by like beckoning sirens in white, flowing dresses.

He closed his eyes and dreamt of the lotus bulb protuberance of the long-stemmed pipe, the sizzling of opium paste over a bright lamp and the soothing pungency of the drug as he sucked it in.

After what seemed a dreamy eternity, a rough Vietnamese voice interrupted his reverie. He opened his eyes to find the sweaty face of the trishaw pedaller turned towards him, asking where he wanted to be set down. The face was gaunt, impassive, nut brown.

Baxingdale smiled sheepishly and noticed for the first time the grotesque varicose veins worming up the pedaller's exposed calves. He picked up the copy of Iron in the Soul from the seat next to him and paid more generously than he needed. He felt guilty about using another human being as a beast of burden. Perhaps that was what this whole senseless war boiled down to, a struggle by people like the pedaller to live with less misery and more dignity.

Rue Catinat was a handsome, tree-lined thoroughfare with many bars, cafes, restaurants and nightclubs. It would not be out of place on the Left Bank in Paris, except that it lacked the literary ghosts and the intellectual ferment of the Sixth Arrondissement. Instead it was pervaded by the same get-rich-quick atmosphere he had encountered in Hong Kong. Only there seemed even greater urgency, as if the transaction had to be completed before the next grenade or bicycle bomb nullified it.

It was remarkable how quickly people adjusted to the possibility of death. It seemed as if some stabilizing instinct lulled them into thinking it could only happen to others. He strolled a little along the boulevard and felt the sense of lightness and well-being induced by opium seeping slowly out of him. He selected a quiet cafe and ordered coffee to cope with returning soberness.

The rush hour had started and, sitting on the pavement in one of the cafe's rattan chairs, he watched the gathering flow of motor vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians. In another couple of hours, Rue Catinat would blossom with whores, pimps, pickpockets, beggars, money changers and drug pushers, drawn by the irresistible smell of Yankee dollars.

The more popular restaurants and nightclubs had metal grilles fitted over their windows to prevent grenades landing among customers. Such premises, after all, were the regular meeting places for influential politicians and diplomats and for foreign correspondents sniffing for gossip. And drifting among the regulars, like Homer's ghosts, would be the lost souls from Kansas or Montana, fresh-faced young men sent to fight for a cause they could not apprehend and who, if they survived, would return home scarred in body or soul or both.

He himself had turned increasingly to opium to dull his disgust at so much bloodletting. As correspondent for the Daily Globe he was supposed to report the truth. But everybody, from his Press baron boss to the two million readers of the newspaper, expected truths to be simple, palatable and digestible. But truths in Indochina were both complex and unpalatable. It was an oriental Balkans. Every truth was cocooned in deceit, illusions and wishful thinking.

Journalistic work would be simple if one stuck to superficialities and military handouts. America assisting freedom-loving peoples to beat back the tide of Communism. Sorties flown, bombs dropped, enemies bodies counted dead or wounded. But that would be far from the total picture. The most powerful country on earth had manufactured an incident in the Gulf of Tonkin in order to participate in a many-sided conflict in an impoverished Asian land. Little did Pentagon planners realize they had stepped into a quagmire.

They had ignored the centuries of rivalries and hatreds, of racial and religious antagonisms. Their roots stretched back to the ancient kingdoms of Annam and Tonkin, to the Khmer empire, to French colonial legacies, to contests between Buddhists and Catholics, to nationalist aspirations and minority races, to the wealth of the few and the enslavement of the many, to outlandish sects like the Hoa-Hao and the Caodists, to bishoprics with private armies, to criminal syndicates and primitive hill tribes preyed upon by all. Those tangled roots bound everyone in a benighted land.

When he stumbled into journalism, he did not realize what he was letting himself in for. His mother had spoken blithely of his becoming a new Zola, to shed light on the injustices of the world. What endearing naivety! More than eighteen months in Vietnam had convinced him of his utter impotence. No matter how pregnant his words, how graphic his descriptions, they became grotesque and unwelcomed when served up in print at the breakfast tables of middle England.

He had written about corruption in high places, misuse of American aid, student leaders spirited away by the secret police, self-immolations by Buddhist monks and nuns, and the oppressions by a Catholic puppet regime. He had detailed the deadly effects of the defoliant Agent Orange and terrorist bombs slaughtering off-duty Americans in bars and nightclubs. He had shed helpless tears watching children ignited by napalm rained upon their villages. The smell of burning human flesh was such that he could no longer bear the thought of eating roasted meat again.

His justification for his grisly occupation was that his words might make a difference, might one day cause people to protest against the recurring barbarities in the world. But they only earned him a reputation as a trouble-maker, undermining the efforts of a just war. American and South Vietnamese authorities angled for his replacement. He was more than willing to go. But the Daily Globe couldn't find a substitute and he was left for a further period recounting the death rattles in a war that everyone was doomed to lose.

What had enabled the Vietcong -- and the people who had supported them -- to endure so much? They had taken everything that modern military technology could inflict and yet had stayed defiant. Were they merely fatalistic or had they been born with higher thresholds for pain? Japan had risen from the ashes. So had South Korea. No doubt, given peace, the Vietnamese

would too. The rest of the world ought to take note of these yellow races. It was not for nothing that Spengler had warned of their rise.

Baxingdale reached into one of the pockets of his tan safari suit for a packet of cigarettes. As he blew a cloud of smoke, he wondered how much longer he could bear the carnage and butchery. Why had he been condemned to this? He had joined the Globe just to make a living. He had not signed up to spend the rest of his days as a professional onlooker, chronicling the inanities and madneses of the human race. If that was his inevitable fate, he would rather die.

The notion of death gradually took hold of him and grew increasingly attractive as he smoked. He was after all a white man, a foreign devil, as the natives would say. He was sitting on an exposed pavement in one of the most deadly cities in the world. He could easily be taken for an American, a legitimate target of opportunity for any Vietcong patriot. A well-aimed grenade or a bicycle bomb would do the trick. It would be over in a flash.

The only snag, he supposed, would be the indignity of being scooped over his own death. That would be rich! Getting killed was an occupational hazard. Perhaps he ought to file the circumstances of his demise in advance. Doing his own obituary could be fun. It wouldn't take long. Dead journalists never rated more than a couple of paragraphs at the bottom of a page.

"Correspondent Killed by Terror Bomb." No sooner had he thought of the headline, he rejected it. Opium must have addled his brains. No headline writer worth his salt would use a word like "correspondent". It was too long and clumsy. He was bound to go for something snappier. Also a verb with more immediacy. He began playing mentally with different combinations and eventually settled for "Bike Bomb Kills Newsmen."

It occurred to him that being blown apart might not necessarily result in death. If the Buddhists were correct, there was no such thing as death. One merely transmigrated from one existence to another. Any existence was bound to be better than the one he was stuck with.

On that note he ordered another cup of coffee and opened Sartre's novel. The words somehow failed to register. He lit another cigarette and as he did so he sensed someone passing in front of him.

"Hello, Joe," a female voice said.

He looked up and saw a Vietnamese girl in a sleeveless red dress with a hemline ending six inches above her knees. She was young and svelte. A small white handbag dangled from a long strap on her left shoulder. Her right hand rested akimbo on a jutting hip. She was pretty enough, in a forward sort of way, and he could see at once that both her beauty and her youth had been overused.

"Hello," he replied. "The name's Sebastian, not Joe."

"Ah, Sebastien! Nice name. You not American, no? I'm so sorry. Your name is name of saint, no? They killed him with arrows. I remember that, see? I learned at convent. My name's Francoise." Her English cooed with pleasing French intonations.

"Well, Francoise, I'm afraid the convent taught you wrong. Saint Sebastian didn't die from arrows. He survived those. He was actually clubbed to death later."

The girl gave a shrug of the shoulders, obviously put off by his pedantic response. She recovered her importuning form quickly, however, and gave a knowing laugh. “You like a good time, Sebastien?” she asked. “I can give you very good time.”

“I’m already having a good time, Francoise. I’m enjoying a fine cup of coffee and I’m reading a good book.”

“I can show you better time. I have special talent,” she said, smiling and shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She thrust her pelvis at him.

Baxingdale regarded her brown, slender legs and the proffered pelvis. Why not, he thought. Anything to hold back the awfulness of the conflict. Sex was as good an escape as opium.

He was about to say something when he caught the flash out of the corner of his eye. A fraction of a second later he heard the explosion and felt something hitting him with great force. He toppled over backwards on the rattan chair, striking the back of his head against the pavement.

He remained dazed for a few moments. Then sounds came back as through a filter. Muffled screams, shouts and the sound of whistles. He became conscious of a weight pressing upon him. There was also an annoyance of hair in his face. Then he saw the red dress and realized it was Francoise. Her limbs were straddling him awkwardly, as if in an unnatural posture of copulation.

“Francoise, Francoise! Are you all right?” he whispered urgently into the mess of hair next to his face.

There was no response. He tried to lift her but could not find the strength. When his hands came away he saw they were covered with blood.

“Oh, no!” he cried, not certain whose blood it was. He felt no pain and that alarmed him even more. Was it the blood of Francoise on his hands or his own? Was his wish for death about to be granted? What about Francoise? He tried to lift her again but failed again. He took hold of Francoise’s head to turn the face towards himself. A pair of lifeless eyes stared back at him. “Someone please help me!” he called with all his might. “A woman’s been badly hurt.”

Eventually the young Vietnamese waiter and some other people came and lifted Francoise off him. She had a piece of shrapnel sticking out of her back.

“Fini,” the waiter said, phlegmatically.

Some people helped him up and sat him down on another rattan chair. His safari jacket was covered with blood. An ambulance arrived and a medic examined him and pronounced him unhurt, save for a few scratches on his legs and the bump on his head. A Vietnamese customer sitting at another table had suffered a serious arm injury. Except for the Vietnamese and Francoise, nobody else had been badly injured.

He asked for another cup of coffee and a cigarette, which the waiter readily supplied.

Police and the security men were fussing around the twisted mess of bicycles at the stand in front of the cafe, watched over by a knot of onlookers. When satisfied that no other device had been planted, a security official came over to take Baxingdale’s particulars and his account of events.

“The girl was your companion?” the security official asked, after Baxingdale had told him what happened.

“No, never saw her before.”

“Then why were you talking to her when the bomb went off?”

“She was asking the way to a convent. I couldn’t help her.”

The security official nodded. “You’re a very lucky man, Monsieur,” he said, closing his notebook and rejoining his colleagues.

In the meantime the medics had led the injured man to an ambulance and Francoise’s body had been bundled away.

The waiter was busy straightening the tables and chairs toppled by the blast and picking up the shards of broken coffee cups and saucers. Next to where Baxingdale had sat, a copy of Iron in the Soul was resting on the ground in a small pool of blood. The waiter picked up the book between thumb and forefinger. A few drops of blood dripped from it. He looked at Baxingdale questioningly. Baxingdale shook his head and the waiter consigned it to the rubbish bin brought along for the clean-up.

Baxingdale felt wrapped in numbness. The bomb had been meant for him. He must have been mistaken for an American. If he had not engaged Francoise for a few minutes in pointless banter, if he had either dismissed her or gone off with her more quickly, she might still be alive. Her death was his responsibility. He was on the scene. He was an eye-witness. Yet it was a tragedy he could not write about. What wholesome British family would be interested in a foreign whore dying half a world away while propositioning a trick?

He finished the coffee. When he felt sufficiently composed he stood up and hailed a taxi. His safari jacket was covered with blood. He told himself he ought to head home to change. Once inside the taxi, however, he asked to be driven to Cholon.