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Chapter Six: Restoration

San Antonio Island, Philippines, November 1999.



The hut looked frail with the coconut timber skeleton almost eaten from the inside out by woodborers and termites. Sago palm leaves neatly stitched together, kept the rain and sun out, and probably held the structure upright and together. An overturned old concrete post served as the step up to the landing of the small verandah. A cat dozed peacefully near the step, her ears tuned for dangers. Split bamboo formed the sides of the small structure. The straight and neat lines of the bamboo gave a symmetry and order, even a purpose to the building.

Around the hut a collection of old, bicycle frames, firewood, plastic containers, ropes, pieces of steel and strips of bamboo cluttered and sat, in contempt of the order of the split bamboo.

Inside the hut, James Collis George sat on a small wooden bench table, hands spread over the hand planed surface. It was just over two years since Ishikawa had dragged him here, from the sleaze and self-destruction of Manila. To dry him out, cure him, save him. At first, he hated it and was literally chained to a bed by his mentor. Then he quickly grew to see this as his only salvation, from the life he had fallen into.

He felt the silky surface of old narra, aged peacefully, from the great ancient *Pterocarpus* forests of the Philippines. Opposite, a colorful glossy poster of fruit and vegetables hung on the wall. Bunches of deep yellow bananas, red- orange papaya, lime-green spears of asparagus, scarlet- red tomatoes and milk chocolate coloured chico fruits. This was the only flash of colour in the interior of the house. The grey, brown faded chroma of old timber, unprotected and worn down by time and human usage. The charcoal grey earthen floor, sandy and sticky after the heavy rains. These were the tones and textures of his house.

Jim closed his eyes. His losses, misery and despair came swirling into view, carried like rafts on a sea of sorrow and misfortune. Through this apparition, he heard the sounds of village life as another day slipped the shackles of night. His eyes still closed, he tuned in on each noise, as a blind man would do to gauge the presence of danger. Children playing, water splashing from the well, pigs squealing, gates swinging and creaking on rusty hinges. His head turned in the opposite direction like a radar antenna, slowly tracking its targets. He tuned into new noises. The women laughing suggestively, their babies crying in symphony. Radios and TVs blaring on close to full volume, and

the smoking, belching noise of motorcycles and trucks careening down the narrow strip of road that hugged the coast.

Then a rooster cried out and his mind wandered again. To the beautiful poetry of the Rubiyat of Omar Khayyam, from where he plucked a verse.

*And, as the Cock crew, those who stood before
The Tavern shouted: "Open then the Door!"
"You know how little while we have to stay,"
"And, once departed, may return no more."*

‘Tempus fugit and all that shit,’ Jim smiled.

The verse lulled him into a gentler mood. Recently, out of curiosity and probably as part of his spiritual healing process, he had taken to reading parts of the Qur’an and Islamic texts, and about Hinduism and Buddhism. He had never bought the story that the Christian version of religion was the right version, nor the only version. That a holy mother could be miraculously impregnated and give birth to a savior. The Sunday school approach, which held a dichotomy between heaven and hell, good and bad, the preaching and the hypocrisy of Christianity, also irritated him. Jim was not sure about the God or Gods, but he knew that no one had the answer and that the jury was still out on the question.

Who am I and why am I here on earth?

In Jim’s case, one could fairly say he was here for the quality and variation of the experience of living. For him life was definitely a process, a journey even and not a destination. A series of extreme highs and lows, of good chapters and chapters he would prefer to forget. He had packed a lot into his life of 45 years, and had degrees in agriculture and engineering, spoke Tagalog, and Visayan dialects from the Philippines, Vietnamese, French and Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin. His Japanese language skills were at the conversational level. In the old Asian languages, he could read and translate Cham script from central Vietnam, and the old text from the Philippines, Baybayin.

He had survived two years in the swamps of the Mekong delta and the madness of that war. He had served his country as a skilled navy diver, then two years in Thailand, discovering life and crime. Then at last, a good chapter in his life started. He met a woman who straightened him out and cleaned him up. She became his wife and helped him into a new career. His main profession and income over the past 20 years was from International Agricultural Development. But his interest in history and archaeology had gradually taken priority in his life, at the expense of everything else, including his marriage.

Jim sighed deeply his eyes still closed. He knew he was still obsessed with collecting the buried treasures of the Japanese Generals. Those artefacts and temple treasures looted from Indonesia, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines. Across the ancient Nan Hai trading route, the Japanese had hoarded war loot during the thirties and forties. The tiger’s treasure as it was called in the Philippines. That he had found some treasures in Papua New Guinea three years earlier, had driven his obsession beyond sanity and reason.

He opened his eyes to release this depression and grimness in his life. He strained to hear softer and natural noises, like the rustling of palm leaves in the slight morning on-shore breeze. With the breeze came the new day scents of the village that he now called home. This place, this village, this hut was now his world. He was safe here. He had no expectations or plans, and lived from day to day. Apart from his mentor Ishikawa, no one from his old life knew he was here. He continued his morning game, as he prepared for another day of nothing to do, except to find food, tend his garden and to survive. To heal a broken spirit and mend a shattered life.

He caught the scent of pig manure: tart, ammonia gassy, and very fresh. Then, more subtle and sweet, the floral notes of washing soap, as women pounded and scrubbed clothes. Tobacco smoke now wafted in from his neighbor, accompanied by a spasm of coughs and throat ejections, onto the ground not far from where Jim rested. Acrid smoke from charcoal fires carried the fatty, zesty smell of grilled pork and frying fish.

He turned in the opposite direction and caught the yeasty notes of fermenting drainage water, where all manner of microscopic life survived in a cocktail of human waste, parasites, cooking grease, algae, mosquito wrigglers and kitchen scraps. This brew had nowhere to go, no outlet, and no escape.

Jim allowed himself a grin. *Bit like me I guess.*

He stretched his arms; the mind games ended for now, and padded his way across three steps of the dirt floor to his bathroom. What could be described better perhaps as a latrine with a makeshift screen of old, split rice bags carelessly joined to enfold the pit. It had taken him some time, but he was now used to the Asian style of squatting over the toilet pit, and had trained his thighs, buttocks and knees to cooperate, after a lifetime of comfortable toilet seats. As usual, his high fruit diet facilitated an easy and quick operation, and after two minutes, he reached for the plastic pail to wash himself. He stood upright and allowed a bucket of cold water, to cascade slowly down his body from head to toe. He gasped involuntarily, as the cold water washed the sweat and heat off his wiry body.

He finished washing, dried and put on old elastic shorts, walked back to the hut area and stared into a piece of tarnished and cracked mirror, fixed to the wall. He studied himself for a while. His body was still well conditioned and always ready. He could do 40 push-ups in 90 seconds and practiced his *Muay Thai* kicks and punches regularly, with his old and faded kick bag. From the young age of 12, Jim had studied martial arts and was now an expert in Muay Thai, Aikido and Kendo. He was proficient in Arnis, the Filipino method of fighting with sticks.

Music was still one of his passions, and he was an accomplished guitar player, and had written a few of his own songs. Ballroom dancing was a favourite past time that he and his ex-wife used to enjoy together every week, but sadly not any more. He had formed his own rock-n-roll band for a while and played in hotels and clubs, as a sideline in the Philippines. Some said Jim could sing like Buddy Holly.

He looked at his smooth skin frame a light brown these days, or as best as an Australian white man could be called brown. A few inches short of six feet, his body was that of a boxer's, with angular edges and muscles clearly defined. In his face lay the hint of cheeks starting to sag a little around his mouth, and a more rounded chin. Small 'chicken's feet' also were visible, spreading from the corners of his green eyes. Just like somebody said 'the face kind'a goes after forty.' He pursed his lips and blew a mock kiss to himself as he combed the pepper and salt coloured hair. Shoulder length, long and straight, but no ponytail. That would be too pretentious for Jim.

Jim mechanically moved towards the cooking area and lit the butane gas stove. That had been something successful in his life lately, at least. Problem conversion he called it. Taking the problem of excess pig waste clogging up the drains and festering into green algae sludge, and converting this to the blue flame of methane gas. All it took was a large plastic bladder, two steel pipes with a makeshift valve, linked to a poly vinyl hose running to the back of his kitchen area. Now everybody was doing it, some more successful than others. Every now and then a bladder would pop, and that was no fun to be standing nearby when one went off.

The blue flame held him entranced and willed him to look deep inside his heart. Three years ago was such a different time and place for Jim. Then, he had a wife, career, house and a successful agricultural consulting business, based in the Philippines. But he would admit now, that the cracks in his life were visible then, but not on the verge of shattering. That had come later: when his wife, his business contacts, even his friends had finally given him up as 'lost'.

Lost... to what, for what?

He now knew. Lost to a consuming depression, from which he could only find relief in chasing a dream. It was not the bland depression of a suburbanite, mid life crisis. He did not believe in such things. It was the pitiful illusion and misplaced faith of a chronic gambler. The man who believes that fate and luck 'owes' him for his past losses, and that he will be rewarded on the final throw of the dice.

He had gambled everything he owned on seeking his obsession: the treasures of war reported to be left behind by retreating Japanese forces at the close of World War Two. Across the many islands and reported loot in sites of the Philippines, he had scrambled unsuccessfully looking for these treasures of war. The treasures and artefacts looted from old sites, temples and collections, across the old Nan Hai trading route.

Jim was one of the believers in the war loot secreted away by the Japanese. His quest to find it had consumed him, and everything he cared for and believed in. Transformed him from a disciplined professional and dedicated husband, to an addicted, obsessed, desperate seeker of the elusive treasures. He was convinced after years of his own research and fieldwork, that the ancient kingdoms of Indo-China, the Khmers, the Chams, the Mons, the Javanese and the Siamese, were the source of many of the gold antiques and treasures looted. In the Philippines they called it the 'Tiger's Treasure', named after the Tiger of Malaya, General Yamashita.

Jim could have stopped his obsession and searching, over three years ago, after a very successful treasure hunt into Papua New Guinea. He had barely escaped with his life and had been rewarded with a haul of hundreds of thousands of dollars in coins, swords, gold bars and souvenirs of the World War Two occupation by the Japanese forces in Rabaul.

His wife had begged him not to do any more treasure hunting, but he had ignored her. Jim had borrowed money with his assets and house as collateral and lost them all. At the time, Jim barely cared about it, nor felt little remorse for what his wife must have gone through. Then depression struck, like a typhoon from the east. He was defenseless in the end and lost the will and strength to work or to live even. Finally, he lost the most precious gift he had left. The unconditional love of a woman, his wife.

That had been almost two years ago. The same time that the kitten had found him or he had found the kitten. He was not sure which was true. One morning he heard its pitiful crying, hiding under an old rice bag near his toilet. At first, he thought it was a rat, about four inches long, stumpy tail and clear blue eyes. Then, he knew it was not a rat, as rats here were on average twice the bulk and had long, skinny tails. Its fur was three tones; tan, black and white. The cat and the man stared at each other for a moment, and in that moment, Jim felt a kindred spirit of sorts. He saw the despair, hopelessness and loneliness that he felt. He offered a morsel of fish, which it ate in spasms of coughing, its eyes darting everywhere scouting for dangers. Then Jim offered water.

That was the start of their relationship. He called the kitten Ming or puss: he was not good or imaginative with animal names. It steadily grew in size and health and was now Jim's shadow. It greeted him like a dog when he came home and sulked when he went away. It gave Jim its affection and loyalty, and had helped him to cope with his problems. Now his wounds were healing, and he felt his inner strength and purpose growing again.

He killed the gas supply to the stove. Strangely, about the same time as his neighbor popped in with a message for Jim. Out of the blue, literally. Snuffed out the hope that was feebly fighting its way back into Jim's outlook and sense of being.

'Hoi Jim... Kumusta. A man in Manila he ask you to call him. His name is Van Thanh. He say tell Jim call him to talk about money you owes him ...'

Jim could not believe him. His heart rate jumped quickly and he felt a tightening of his scrotum. It must be a mistake or coincidence maybe. 'What...who was that Dado?'

'He says Van Thanh...says you old friends before you come back from New Guinea.'

Jim only knew one person called Van Thanh. One he wished many time he had never met and done business with. Unexpectedly from nowhere, a call from the man he wanted most to forget. Van Thanh...the man he thought he could kill if he had the opportunity. The man who encouraged Jim's self-destruction, who enticed him, who took him to the brink of extinction. A man who practiced treachery and foul play, just as if he played his mahjong: every day and to win only.

Jim simply nodded to Dado. 'Thanks.' He felt sick and weak. During his two-year exile and rehabilitation, Jim had gotten to the point of forgetting his debt, and with that amnesia, some hope had visited him, softening his dark days. The Vietnamese cobra, with veins of poison and a black heart, had finally tracked him down, and was going to call in his debt. Or something worse Jim felt. Jim knew he could not keep running from this man. He had found Jim on this small island, so he could find him on another. Jim would have to be permanently on the run from island to island.

I must face him now and deal with him. I cannot go forward until this matter is dealt with. One way or another.