

Prologue

Chasing the Dragon

Berkeley, California

1968

Though it was mid-morning, all the shades were drawn in a small brown-shingle house on a tree-lined street, overlooking the bay. A chill wind blew in off the water, but cedar smoldering in the fireplace warmed the house. Mingling with incense, it scented the air with woodland and spice. A young man, pale and gaunt, sat cross-legged by the fire on a threadbare carpet spread over the hardwood floor. He wore gathered pants in shades of carmine and violet, tied at the waist with a woman's scarf. But he wore no shirt.

Beside him, a goblet of Bordeaux sparkled in the firelight. He swirled the blood-red elixir several times before he tipped the glass and drank it. Then he got up to start a record spinning on the turntable. A haunting guitar resonated in the room. A lone male voice soon followed.

The young man sat down again. Behind him, dancing in the flickering light, lithographs watched from the wall as a naked child played a silent game. Though he was unaware of the child's presence, he would not have been surprised to find the child there. The room was awash in a liqueur from the

spirit world so thick it could have been poured out and served to guests, but there were none. Only the young man and his naked child.

Taking a match from an ornate brass box, the young man lit a large candle. A wisp of smoke rose, then trailed away, replaced by a flame. The candlelight illuminated a smudged outline of black kohl surrounding his eyes; his pale skin appeared almost translucent in its glow. A strand of long dark hair fell across his face from a crooked part in the center of his forehead. He brushed it away. Though his hair was tangled and matted, he did not care. He was the slave of another master.

The young man pinched a small piece of aluminum foil into a shape that resembled a tiny Chinese sampan, the way he had learned in a teahouse, a hovel, on the edge of Da Nang. Into the aluminum sampan, he emptied a packet of unrefined brown crystal. Heroin- the blood of the poppy, made from resin scraped away by a knife that would then turn and cut the poppy again. Leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, the young man held the little boat over the candle. As the heroin warmed, it turned to a muddy liquid. Small droplets raced inside the tiny craft, then vaporized into smoke on contact with the heat of the candle. Following the smoke with a small straw, he inhaled as he rocked the boat back and forth over the flame.

Chasing the Dragon they called it.

The hot resinous smoke burned his throat, then his lungs, and found its mark. He sat motionless, waiting. Then a wave of realization crashed in on him. He remembered the wine. But it was too late. He was trapped in a

moment of blinding awareness before his world turned dark.

Then, as if in slow motion, his eyes rolled back in his head. He sat suspended for a moment before gravity began its relentless pull. His head fell to one side, and the weight of it drew him to the floor.

The crash startled the child, who stopped the silent game. After some time, the frightened child gathered the courage to creep alongside the young man and tried to wake him. But there was no response. The child began to cry. And cried, and cried, and cried, until there were no more tears. Then the young man's naked exhausted child fell asleep beside him in the hollow between his knees and his chest.

The arm of the turntable slowly spun into the center, filling the room with strangely soothing sound of rhythmic static. The fire burned itself out, daylight waned, and cold crept into the room. The candle melted into a pool of wax that swallowed the tiny aluminum sampan and the vicious vaporous dragon that the young man unleashed.

. . . in those days there was no king so every man did what was right in his own sight . . .

From the book: *A Far Strange Country*
- J.L. Windfield -
Copyright © 2010 River3 Digital Press
Writers Guild Registration - No. 1082140
Duplication Without Authorization Prohibited
- All Rights Reserved -