

The Leapfrogging Pool

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*The cool mist of the waterfall surrounded me like a roaring blue-green fog. My friend was gone---as if swallowed into the demon's salivating mouth, and for the first time, I had not been by his side when he reached for my hand.*

*We were like brothers---we had endured other hardship together and come from it stronger. Now the day had come when everything between us seemed to have been lost, without words spoken.*

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Jimmy Roundtree and I had only two things in common when we met. His father and mine flew airplanes for the same outfit, and we both suffered studies under the same tutelage---the always-sweating Russian Prince---self proclaimed as he was.

Our fathers flew transports over *The Hump* together, and made their fame as daring if not careless flyers. When the war was over, several of the best of Chenault's *Flying Tigers* rode their fame into private enterprise. So it was with our fathers.

Their exploits took them to Burma, India, and Indonesia, where their talents were in demand as flight instructors. The latter assignment, flying for the Indonesian *Angatan Udara*, was perhaps the most challenging, but certainly not the most dangerous. Flying *the Hump* had tested both their skills, and I remember tales about the dangers of

stretching the airplane capabilities and dodging the ground flak, while protecting the *Burma Road*. I used to read his flight logs---the "remarks" column read like an adventure book.

*Lost sister C-47---ground fire."*

*"Dinjan, Assam India to Kunming China---three-ball alert over the Hump at 18,000 feet.*

*"Artillery fire, Tenchung---Jap air raid in progress on letdown."*

*"Dog fight during rice drop---Paoshan---lost right engine over Yyi River."*

*" Mountain crossing via Pao and Teng---RAF co-pilot---Blacky went down--- Search for Blacky---no wreckage."*

Roundtree was always with him. They flew together at Jones Field in Bonham, Texas to earn their wings, and early on, they would start building their legends. It wasn't enough to fly under the Red River Bridge in Louisiana wing tip to wing tip, but they did it upside-down. They were of high interest in three states by authorities looking for those two P-40's.

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It was 1951, near Jakarta, Indonesia. It was one of the days that the flight was supposed to be uneventful, so Jimmy and I had been invited along. Roundtree and my father were pilot and co-pilot, and our C-47 got swallowed in a monsoon and hit by lightning, severing a sizeable piece of the left wing. It was necessary to put the plane down in a rice field, and I remember my father shouting back at us from the cockpit to buckle in extra tight. The seats in the C-47 were just single rows of bench-like perforated metal, extending down each side of the fuselage, and freight was tied down securely in

the middle. Jimmy had moved over to the port side of the plane to look out the window at the damaged wing, and I had remained on the right, so we couldn't see each other through the stacks of freight.

Just the sound Jimmy's voice was comforting, as the plane was wobbling and listing hard to the left---turning in a wide, spiraling circle, and headed down.

"Hang on tight over there," he shouted, almost cheerily---like what you might say to someone in the next bucket below you on a rocking Ferris wheel.

I could see the green of the rice paddy---distorted by the monsoon rain, and looking like liquefied grass against the portside windows. In the cabin, I could see Roundtree and my father's hands both grasping the throttle levers together, and Roundtree was calling out "mayday" on the crackling, popping radio.

I was braced hard against the metal bench, almost lying down, wishing it would be over. The impact surprised me. It was like riding a skipping rock across a pond. Surprisingly gentle, making contact, then lifting up again. The last contact was like the stopping of an elevator too fast---leaving your stomach behind.

The plane settled. The engine noise was gone, and you could only hear the dashing rain against the metal fuselage. My father called out, and Jimmy and I answered simultaneously---as if rehearsed. It was like voice-over speech:

"We're okay."

In minutes there was a collection of rice farmers around us chattering like magpies, with two bamboo ox carts that would later be used to ferry us out. My father said it was worse than he first thought. The wing was shredded and several sections were missing up to the engine cowling. The plane was lying like a beached whale in the rice

paddy, its propellers folded like a parasol---and the tail section bent sideways as if heated plastic. I heard Roundtree and my father bragging about the crumpled C-47. My father was muttering something poetic, "like a kite settling gracefully into a tree---feathery and proud."

And Roundtree added less poetically, "Goddamn fine airplane."

Jimmy and I had much to tell the tutor the next day. His name was Arthur, but that was just his Americanized name. You couldn't spell or pronounce his real one, except for the "Prince" title that preceded it. School was held in the garage that had been converted to a study and office. It was pretty much correspondence work, reading, then doing lessons and mailing them back to the States. The tutor was there to mostly explain the math and science, perform some experiments in chemistry and biology, and give the tests. Other days, he was strictly a tour guide, as we made many field trips in the Jeep to places that were of historic interest, art galleries, and museums. He was a good teacher, but he tired easily on our field trips. He would sit down frequently on a little cricket stool that looked sort of like an umbrella, but would stick in the ground and give him a perch from which to rest and wipe his brow. Jimmy and I would busy ourselves with looking for four-leaf clovers, or engage in impromptu pocketknife games and contests on the lawns. In a while we would move on, discussing the things we saw---temples, shrines, statues.

Jimmy and I were inseparable. It was partly because we were cast together in like circumstances---the only American kids around---and also because we just gelled. He was good in math and science, and I excelled in English and the arts. We helped each other through the difficulties when the tutor wasn't around. In our free time, we were

comrades and adventurers---exploring the countryside around the town of Bandung, where we lived.

One enduring and snickering pastime was watching the shameless natives defecating in the troughs of water that were endless little canals diverted for that purpose. They were like rivulet spider webs---almost everywhere we went. For us---two *Tidy-Didy* Americans that had been professionally and meticulously potty-trained---observing these cultural differences was an awakening experience. The absence of modesty was another revelation. Small children were always using the troughs---rarely with any clothing on at all. Their cleanup was like a makeshift bidet---just fanning one's posterior with water splashed up from the same trough. We laughed, but we probably meant to cry---it was such a vivid example of poverty and a vast difference in culture.

There was equal awe in watching Indonesians climb. Scaling an eighty-foot palm to the top fronds would humble the best of American telephone-pole climbers. No belt, no spikes, just clinging to the trunk in a bear hug, with legs out at 45-degree angles, moving like an inchworm. Whether fetching coconuts or scaling rubber trees to empty collection-bowls, they had the art perfected. You couldn't help but admire their skill, and eating coconuts took on a new appreciation when we considered the art of their picking.

Jimmy and I lived next door to each other, in what was an upper class compound. Many of the Indonesian officials lived there, as did the high ranking from the military. There were security guards at all times, largely to protect against communist sympathizers, not the humble natives. Since we were affluent by any comparison, we drew crowds of the curious, who would hang by the gates or perch on the walls around the compound and stare. When Jimmy and I approached them, they would usually run---

either in fear or awe. Sometimes they placed raw fruit and whole dried fishes wrapped in banana leaves on the top of the wall---like offerings---but for who, or what? Jimmy and I thought it was always a little spooky.

In addition to the guards, it was common to have several servants, usually a cook, a yard-boy, and a house-servant. Our main servant was given the name Eddie and was reasonably good in English, having been educated in the Methodist-sponsored school as a young man. In his free time, Eddie would play three-man soccer with Jimmy and me, and he taught us much about the game---not only the rules, but the discipline and patience of when to take the shot. We spent hours on the lawn, and when just about parched, Eddie would bring out a large pitcher of limeade---freshly squeezed, with a gardenia always floating on the surface.

One such day we sat on the steps leading up to the veranda and Jimmy had his back to the rail. Suddenly Eddie told us to sit very still---not to move a muscle. My eyes scanned the area---seeing nothing out of the ordinary---as Eddie inched his way toward Jimmy. There, just under Jimmy's arm, which was stretched out on the top of the stair rail, there was a cobra, with hood fanned just beneath his armpit. Eddie gradually moved in close, his eyes a big as tennis balls. Suddenly, in a lightning-quick move, he grabbed the snake in his fist. It coiled around his arm, attempting to spit its venom into his face. Eddie disappeared around the side of the house, snake in tow, and returned a few minutes later with the snake, minus head. He explained to us that his wide eyes and his gentle and coy approach were hypnotic-like replications of a mongoose, the snake's feared enemy. It was the most incredible thing either of us had ever witnessed. Our fathers seemed

skeptical that it happened just that way, despite seeing the snake carcass that we kept until it stank.

Jimmy and I would never practice that feat, not even on the harmless green lizards that were so easy to get close to, when you baited them with bean curd.

The *Angatan Udara* pilots and staff spent many of their Saturdays together at a resort called Lembang. There was picnicking, games, horseback riding, and some of the best barbecued *sate* around. The *sate* was cubed beef or ox, speared on a skewer with exotic fruits and vegetables, roasted slowly over a wood fire, and basted with a peanut sauce.

The aviators washed it down with Chinese beer and wine, and Jimmy and I had to endure our daily ration of goat's milk, which usually got poured out when no one was watching. When the milk was gone, we were allowed to drink *Dolapan*, which was a fruity mixture of the juices of lime, papaya, and jumbor fruit. We could never replicate its flavor at home. There was something special about the Lembang recipe. Some of the aviators put rum in it, and when they did that, they renamed it "*Tiger Oil*."

Jimmy and I liked to explore the small caverns that dotted the mountainside, prowl through the bamboo thickets looking for mango trees, or swim in the waters of the pool that formed beneath a 800-foot blue-green waterfall that careened over the edge of a cliff. It was a spectacular rainbow-tinted cascade called Vessel of the God, for its narrow neck at the top, and its flaring out as it fell.

It was truly exciting to swim beneath the falls in the crystal bubbling pool, and to point your face upward into the rushing avalanche of water.

I hadn't seen Jimmy for the last thirty minutes, and I figured he had gone back to the picnic area for more Dolapan. Just then I heard screams, and people all around me were pointing up to the top of the falls. There was Jimmy---I could recognize the red shirt with the yellow star on it---a souvenir from an Indonesian soccer team. He was standing out on a rock ledge, a foot or two away from where the river released itself into the air. People were furiously waving at him to get back, but he just stood there, leaning over to watch the river pour over the edge. Across from him there was a similar protruding ledge---the two almost touching---so that the river made its way between them, like frothy blue liquid emerging from the neck of a funnel.

I knew what he was thinking as he edged toward the opposite side. He was going to cross over the water, one foot on each ledge, with the river passing beneath him. I prayed---*God Jimmy---don't do this*. The other words, *idiot* and *numbskull*, would have to wait until I saw that he made it.

In an instant, he disappeared. He was not on either side. All eyes focused on the rocky pool below, where maybe six onlookers were backing up slowly in neck-deep water. He did not appear. Roundtree and my father were suddenly in the pool along with the others, wading around and watching for his body to surface. It did not.

Then, the onlookers began waving their arms and pointing up again. For a moment, I decided that he must have just stepped back, and had never left the rock he was standing on. But I couldn't see anything. Now people were pointing to a lower part of the waterfall. Suddenly I saw it---the red and yellow shirt, flying in and out of a portion of the waterfall about thirty feet from the top. The shirt would disappear and reappear, as if being flashed like a signal. It was Jimmy, hung across a rock in the

cascading shower of water, like a towel across a towel-bar. The current was billowing out his shirt, making it appear to inflate and deflate like a balloon.

Several men started up the side of the cliff toward the top, carrying ropes that they had quickly cut from the rows of playground swings. Roundtree and my father joined them for the climb, well over eight hundred feet. It seemed to take forever, and I could envision Jimmy losing his grip, if he in fact was gripping at all. He was bound to be taking in water, because he was in the middle part of the falls. I closed my eyes for what was a week.

At the top, they began connecting the swing ropes together, and three or four of them tied it to their waists to create an anchor. Roundtree stood at the edge, waving the rope back and forth across where Jimmy's shirt ballooned out. No hand came out to grab it. Time and time again it passed over the very spot, dancing wildly as if being tossed out, then retrieved---like some kind of playful game.

They hoisted it back to the top, and Roundtree tied himself to the end. Gradually the group of men lowered him the thirty feet down. He was attempting to steady himself by repelling against the side of the cliff, but the edge of the crashing water would jerk and flip him about, as if a theatre puppet.

When he got to Jimmy's location, he swung himself to and fro, gaining enough arc to pass by the rock that Jimmy was hanging onto, or was impaled upon--nobody knew which.

In one of those passes, he bought Jimmy out with him, grabbing him around the waist like a limp sack of feed. Slowly they retrieved him---would the rope hold? It had

been battered about the rocks time after time, and now it had the weight of both of them. Inch by inch they moved upward, sometimes twirling complete circles in the current.

They reached the top to cries of victory, and slowly Roundtree turned around, clutching Jimmy in one arm and holding up his other hand in a characteristic okay-sign. It was the aviator tradition--*thumbs up*.

Jimmy was safe, except for a case of chills and numerous scrapes and bruises. They wouldn't let me close to him at first--they kept waving me away. He looked at me with hollow eyes and chattering teeth. It was the first time we had not been together through a crisis. I felt strangely distanced from him for the first time ever. It was like I had let him down--had not been there for him. I had guilt where there should be none.

When we met again at school I could tell something was different. He was changed--not in appearance, but in persona. I was worried that we might never see each other in the same light again.

I talked to Eddie about the strangeness I sensed. He told me an Indonesian story he translated as being, '*The Reckoning of Mepana*.' It was about a young girl who had an imaginary friend, and how when she outgrew it, she cast it away--yet still sensed an unexplainable personal loss and guilt--like abandonment. He explained that Mepana was just combating the emotions of growing up. What happened with Jimmy was a more sudden maturing that comes from near-tragedy.

"Your little friend has temporarily leapfrogged you in the journey to becoming a man--soon you will catch back up to him, and all will be the same," he said, in his best Methodist-School English.

I decided I could be patient. I figured Eddie was right---like about the mongoose.

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