

The Yellow Sarong

London 1973

From his room in Notting Hill Tommo only has to change trains once. He visits Finsbury Park after the dinner hour. Camouflaged in the darkness, he finds Alex's house from the address on the back of her letter. It's on the corner of an intersection; similar houses, each three stories high, stand on the other two corners. Lights from a pub filter onto the footpath on the fourth corner. He walks past and saunters another block.

The White Lion. Melting into the shadows, Tommo treads lightly back to the pub. He's still a scout, only the jungle is urban now: street smells of piss and garbage, and sounds of tyres on wet tarmac, and danger. He has no idea why he thinks danger lies there. Reflexes, that's all.

He ducks into the pub doorway. A fog of smoke hits him, friendly shouts, the smell of beer and the thud of darts into a board. He takes his beer to a small table by the front window. Sitting with his back to the room, he contemplates Alex's house. His foot beats its quick pattern against the worn floor.

Silently he finishes his beer and leaves, not looking back.

Vietnam 1972

Tommo was thinking about the Vietnamese girl with the round cheeks and long hair. Her name was Kim, and she was Hue's sister.

Hue was the Vietnamese member of their team, assigned to them when they'd arrived at Da Nang. Hue told Tommo that before he became a soldier he was a junior mathematics teacher at the university. Although Tommo knew Hue's family lived in the mountains a three-hour trek from the town, Hue had never mentioned a sister.

Until they met accidentally in the covered market.

She was wearing a long white tunic split up the sides, with black trousers underneath, and she ran up to Hue with a smile fit to light up the whole marketplace.

Brighter than the yellow marigolds at the flower stall.

“My sister, Kim,” Hue said to Tommo, smiling sheepishly. “This is Tommo, from Australia,” he said to her in Vietnamese. “He’s working with the Americans.”

Tommo understood enough of the language by now to stammer a greeting. When she smiled her round cheeks puffed out, showing two rows of small white teeth under a full top lip. Her long hair hung straight as the river running behind the market.

She was about eighteen, he guessed.

Simultaneously they looked at each other and then at the ground. Tommo could see her toes peeping out of frayed scuffs. Hue seemed not to notice their embarrassment.

With flushed cheeks the girl looked up to meet Tommo’s gaze and politely invited him to visit their village on his next leave. He stopped staring at her, forcing his eyes to rove sideways over the next-door stall, which sold garlic cloves, knobby ginger root and stalks of pale green lemon-grass.

Hue spoke before him. “We’ll see,” he said, as Tommo tried to think of the Vietnamese words to say, I’d like that. Very much.

They left Kim bargaining for a handful of dried fish at the shrimp merchant’s.

A month later, exhausted and ready for leave, they trudged into base camp. They hadn’t washed or changed their clothes. Tommo’s feet were covered in blisters from the rubber sandals. Leeches bloodied his legs and feet; mosquito bites scabbed his face and neck and the webbing from his pack chafed across his chest where an ugly-looking ulcer had formed. He slept for two days. After they had rested, eaten, and washed their cuts and bruises, Hue took Tommo up into the mountains to visit his family.

Only a couple of very old men, a few women and a gaggle of children lived in the village. The men were all fighting in the South Vietnamese Army. Like Hue, they were scouts, or battling Viet Cong in the mountains. “Sometimes they come home on leave,” Hue explained, although in all his visits Tommo never met them. Many had been killed by incursions from

across the border. The village was crippled, with the women struggling to provide some sort of life for the kids.

Hue introduced Tommo to his wife and baby daughter. Tommo gave her the bag of rice he'd brought from the PX. She nodded and smiled her thanks. The children ran up and he gave them sweets. The wooden house was raised off the ground, away from the threat of scorpions and snakes, and to provide air-flow under the floor. He smelled incense, sandalwood maybe, and saw long sticks burning in front of a family altar.

Kim appeared from behind the bamboo door and smiled at him. She was as pretty as he remembered, with her long, thick hair and round cheeks, blushing now. Tommo felt something stir deep within him. He hadn't felt so happy since he arrived in Vietnam.

Since even before that. Since when? He couldn't remember.

Hue went off to talk to his wife. Kim gestured for Tommo to sit on the slatted verandah. While the children played in the street, Kim poured coffee. With his limited Vietnamese, and her small number of English words, he found out that she ran a small school to teach the kids, who played wild, naked and hungry the rest of the time. Each morning she gathered the children into the village clearing and read them stories. They wrote on the hard earth with sticks. They sang songs too.

"What kind of songs?" Tommo asked.

"Every song," she replied. "Folk songs. Elvis Presley. Johnny Cash."

He raised his eyebrows and they both laughed. As they reached for their drinks their hands brushed, and this time she didn't look down.

Tommo felt the hardness he had developed over those long months soften dangerously. He knew lots of soldiers went with Vietnamese girls. It helped their families to have a little extra money coming in. But this was different. He didn't want to pay Hue's sister for her friendship, or her love, if it came to that. Was that what she expected? She seemed too good for that. He stood up and stared at the street.

Kim looked confused, lowered her head and sipped her coffee.

Hue appeared around the side of the house. "Time to go," he said in Vietnamese.

The girl scrambled to her feet, still looking at the floor. He was afraid he'd hurt her now with his silent rebuff. How could he have been so stupid? He took her hand and kissed it. She raised her eyes to meet his and at last smiled.

As he waved goodbye, the warmth of her fingertips stayed with him.

After the first visit, Tommo brought his cassette player and taught the kids to sing along to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. To hear their voices piping "Octopus's Garden" in their Vietnamese accents always made him laugh. And feel sad at the same time.

Tom kept Van Morrison for his afternoons with Kim. By now he knew enough Vietnamese to translate the lyrics for her.

On his second visit, after they had drunk their coffee, Kim took his hand and pulled him inside to a tiny room with rattan walls and a wooden floor. A window-flap woven from palm leaves was propped open. Along one side a wooden bed covered with straw mats waited for them. Kim's cheeks were pink as he pulled her into his arms. The cassette whirred its tinny sounds from the verandah while sunlight slanted across the room.

Through the long afternoon the shadows moved across their bodies.

He undid her long hair. A bead of sweat formed in front of her ear. He watched it gather beside the soft pink tissue. It remained motionless while he licked the corners of her mouth, her nose, her eyelids.

The bead grew larger.

He licked her cheek. Like mango juice sliding down an arm, the bead of sweat slipped down the side of her face. It reached her jaw line and teetered for a moment, held back by strands of hair, which appeared magnified through the fluid. It became elongated, pendulous. The surface tension broke and it trickled down her throat to lie at the base of her neck, glistening on its bed of salty skin.

He licked the knob of bone to one side of the well. He licked her chin. Her neck. She sighed. He kissed her from one nipple to the other - soft kisses, across, across. Her eyelids fluttered. He raised his head, smiling slightly. Her eyes were closed. She waited. His pink tongue found the droplet, drank it in, drank her clean.

He kissed the hollow at the base of her throat.

Another bead of sweat gathered at her temple.

Later she brought a basin of water infused with tamarind. She placed his calloused feet in the liquid, stroked his legs, massaged his ankles and squeezed the balls of his feet. Caressing his toes, she ran her fingers between them. She pulled each toe out to its full length and turned the foot from side to side. With her fingers she trickled water from his knee down his calf. The water slid across his foot and through his toes. At last she lifted his feet from the basin and placed them on a yellow sarong, drying them with the soft cloth.

Tommo sighed. This was it. He needed nothing more. Her breasts glistened with perspiration, as if his love had coated her with mist. She bent forward to touch his foot and her hair fell across her face.

"I didn't know," he said in Vietnamese.

"Know what?"

"When I first saw you. That you were Hue's sister."

"Oh. You mean in the market?"

"He never told me he had a sister."

She smiled. "I knew who you were. Hue had told me about your green eyes."

"Dead giveaway. Anyway, why didn't Hue bring me here before?"

"Because he was afraid --." She gestured around the room. "Of us. Doing ..."

"This." With his two hands, he reached for her face and pulled her towards him. He kissed her again. "I planned it," Tommo whispered into her hair.

"Was it a good plan?"

"It was the best plan. Now I want to stay forever." He sat up. "But I can't. My leave's up tomorrow."

"You'll come back?" She looked up at him.

He slid down to her feet and lifted one foot into the basin of water. His hands, hardened from carrying the gun, torn from thorns, bitten by mosquitoes and sucked by leeches, moved down the calf of her leg. He dribbled water onto her knee. Massaged her ankle. Somehow he was

licking her, he was following the trail of water with his tongue. Up her calf, over her knee, along her thigh.

The musky taste of her overtook him.

Fat drops of rain plopped onto the verandah outside their room. They heard a cacophony of birds greeting the downpour. A pig squealed. Goats bleated and ran under the house. Hue shouted to the children and they raced inside. From the next room came a clatter of cooking pots and a murmur of voices.

Tommo forgot the afternoon deluge, he forgot his gun in the corner, the napalm in the next valley, the dead bodies in their cockpits and their body bags. The jungle steamed and sweated in the monsoon drenching. Water collected in pools and ran in rivulets through the narrow street but the lovers didn't notice.

Tomorrow would be another mission. Another crash site, another trek through hopelessness, another day to survive madness. He twined his fingers through the sanity of Kim's hair, the only thing that was real in his crazy world, and stared at the thatched ceiling while the rain poured down.

"I'll come back," he breathed into her ear at last, "I'll come back."

London 1973

The next day he arrives at the pub earlier in the evening, ready this time for the noise and jostle. Holding his beer in one hand, he pulls the darts from the board with his other hand. Steps back, takes aim, throws. Three in a row, deadly accuracy: bullseye, bullseye, bullseye. Nothing to it.

"Hey, Shorty, fancy being on our team?"

Tommo shakes the man's hand. "Yeah, why not," he nods.

"Oh. An Aussie, are you? Lots of them round here."

"Yeah." Non committal. Straight face. Green eyes unblinking.

"Aussies aren't good at darts. Especially those girls across the road," the bloke nods his head in the direction of Alex's house. Tommo breaks out in a sweat. "Hopeless. Good lookers though."

The two men laugh and begin a game. It's an hour before Tommo can edge to the single table by the window. He marks the house across the road and sits unmoving for another hour, staring out the window, thinking about the jungle, straining to hear birds, or a snake slithering through the undergrowth, or a tiger's distant deep-throated roar.

He drains his glass, pushes his way through the crowd at the bar and heads back to Notting Hill. What can he say to Alex? "Oh, and by the way, I fell in love with a Vietnamese girl." Alex will never understand. She was furious with him last time he saw her. So much has happened since then. But how can he tell Alex about Vietnam?

He'll never be able to speak of it with anyone who wasn't there.

Hue and Kim had been his family for two years. The rest and rec weekends every month offered a brief peace: the women and kids welcoming him, trusting him, spoiling him. Relief from the madness.

Kim's eyes, her hair, her skin, her breasts. Her laugh and her faith. She taught him how to place offerings at the door, and how to light a bundle of incense sticks with one match. By reducing time to now, she had cajoled him into forgetting about the war and the terrible part he played in it. Now, there was nothing except the rattan room with the thatch roof. Now, the sun was slinking in long shadows across the wooden floor. Now, there were only the two of them on the thin mattress. Her yellow sarong. Kim. Kim with her round cheeks and tinkling laugh.

How can he tell Alex about his last leave?

About trekking for three hours up the mountain to the village.

Vietnam 1972

Hue had left the evening before, to walk up under cover of darkness. He was happy to be going home on leave. It would be their last visit to the village together. Tommo was shipping out next week. "Meet you there," Tommo said as Hue waved a cheery goodbye. "Tell Kim I'll be home about midday."

The next morning, after his meeting with the commander to request permission to marry Kim, Tommo swung his pack laden with rice and PX stores onto his back. He loved the freedom of trekking in these mountains.

He knew charlie seldom roamed this high. The Cong soldiers left the hills alone.

Around every turn in the track there was a soothing vista of trees covered with canopies of vines. Ginger flowers and creepers with yellow blossoms nodded at him. Small shrines beside the track punctuated his trek. Today the jungle seemed quiet, not so many birds, no wild pigs. His rifle swung loosely beside him. Once he stopped to take off his boots and bathe his feet in a stream. He ate a banana and set off on the last part of his journey. Kim would be waiting for him.

Something was wrong. The jungle was too quiet. He felt the skin on the back of his neck prickle. The village was around the bend. He should be hearing the goats and pigs. And why weren't the kids running to greet him? Or sitting in the trees with big grins, waiting to pelt him with berries.

A familiar stench of burning reached his nostrils. He tightened his grip on the rifle. Keeping to the trees he stepped around the last bend and stood, motionless.

There was nothing left. The village had been fire-bombed. A dead piglet lay in the street. Its head had been cut off. No. It wasn't a piglet. It was a headless baby, its legs blackened with burns. Tommo stumbled backwards, sweating and trembling. His insides turned to jelly, as they had never done on any mission so far.

The baby's head had rolled into a smoking fire pit. Other hacked bodies, women and children, lay in abandon across the village square. Kim. Where was Kim?

He gagged, feeling himself losing it. Easy, boyo.

Repressing the urge to rush in, he forced himself to back into the shadow of the trees. Watching. Listening. Nothing moved. With numb intensity he stood guard for hours in the shelter of the jungle before he crept forward.

Where Hue's house had once stood there were a few burnt piers. Every house was blackened to its stumps. There was nothing left. The place was empty. The silence felt eerie. It was plain that he was alone. Except for the dead bodies: Kim, almost unrecognisable, burns covering her body with

an obscene crust. A scrap of yellow cloth, all that remained of her sarong, was caught around her toe. He pulled at it, yanking it free, and pressed it to his mouth, whispering her name over and over, until sobs overcame him. Tears streamed down his face.

In the unearthly silence, the sound of his weeping shocked him.

Stumbling now, he found Hue clinging to his wife in a macabre embrace. A body that looked like grandma. Many of the kids. And the baby. He lost count.

Suddenly he had to shit. He crouched in the street, his inside pouring out, his loss spreading in a dark stain over the scarred earth.

He waited a day and a night, sleeping in the jungle at the edge of the village square. No-one came. There were too many bodies to bury. With his machete he scooped a hole for the baby, placing the head and body together in a shallow grave beside the stream. Digging steadily through his tears, he made another grave for Kim.

And then he trekked back down the mountain to a life without her.

Bloody war.

Bloody waste.

London 1973

He has to tell someone, or he'll go mad.

He leaves the pub, crosses the road and knocks on Alex's front door.