



ADVENTURES IN THE DUMB LIFE

My friend Gene Skinner met us at the airport in Honolulu, parking his black GTO convertible up on the sidewalk by the baggage carousel and fending off public complaints with a distracted wave of his hand and the speedy behavior of a man with serious business on his mind. He was pacing back and forth in front of his car, sipping from a brown bottle of Primo beer and ignoring the oriental woman wearing a meter maid's uniform who was trying to get his attention as he scanned the baggage lobby.

I saw him from the top of the escalator and I knew we would have to be quick with the luggage transfer. Skinner was so accustomed to working in war zones that he would not see anything wrong with driving up on the sidewalk in the middle of an angry crowd to pick up whatever he'd come for . . . which was *me*, in this case, so I hurried toward him with a businesslike smile on my face. "Don't worry," he was saying. "We'll be out of here in a minute."

Most people seemed to believe him, or at least wanted to. Everything about him suggested a person who was better left alone. The black GTO had a menacing appearance, and Skinner looked meaner than the car. He was wearing a white linen reef jacket with at least thirteen custom-built pockets to fit everything from a phosphorous grenade to a waterproof pen. His blue silk slacks were sharply creased and he wore no socks, only cheap rubber sandals that slapped on the tile as he paced. He was a head taller than anyone else in the airport and his eyes were hidden behind blue-black Saigon-mirror sunglasses. The heavy, square-linked gold Bhat chain around his neck could only have been bought in some midnight jewelry store on a back street in Bangkok, and the watch on his wrist was a gold Rolex with a stainless steel band. His whole presence was out of place in a crowd of mainland tourists shuffling off an Aloha flight from San Francisco. Skinner was not on vacation.

He saw me as I approached, and held out his hand. "Hello, Doc," he said with a curious smile. "I thought you quit this business."

"I did," I said. "But I got bored."

"Me too," he said. "I was on my way out of town when they called me. Somebody from the Marathon committee. They needed an official photographer, for a thousand dollars a day."

He glanced down at a brace of new-looking Nikons on the front seat of the GTO. "I couldn't turn them down," he said. "It's free money."

"Jesus," I said, "you're a photographer now?"

He stared down at his feet for a moment, then pivoted slowly to face me, rolling his eyes and baring his teeth to the sun. "This is the Eighties, Doc. I'm whatever I need to be."

Skinner was no stranger to money. Or to lying, either, for that matter. When I knew him in Saigon he was working for the CIA, flying helicopters for Air America and making what some people who knew him said was more than \$20,000 a week in the opium business.

I never talked about money with him and he had a visceral hatred of journalists, but we soon became friends and I spent a lot of time during the last weeks of the war smoking opium with him on the floor of his room in the Continental Palace. Mr. Hee brought the pipe every afternoon around three—even on the day his house in Cholon was hit by a rocket—and the guests lay down in silence to receive the magic smoke.

That is still one of my clearest memories of Saigon—stretching out on the floor with my cheek on the cool white tile and the dreamy soprano babble of Mr. Hee in my ears as he slithered around the room with his long black pipe and his little bunsen burner, constantly refilling the bowl and chanting intensely in a language that none of us knew.

"Who are you working for these days?" Skinner asked.

"I'm covering the race for a medical journal," I said.

"Wonderful," he said quickly. "We can use a good medical connection. What kind of drugs are you carrying?"

"Nothing," I said. "Absolutely nothing."

He shrugged, then looked up as the carousel began moving and the bags started coming down the chute. "Whatever you say, Doc," he said. "Let's load your stuff in the car and get out of here before they grab me for felony menacing. I'm not in the mood to argue with these people."

The crowd was getting restive and the oriental policewoman was writing a ticket. I lifted the beer bottle out of his hand and took a long swallow, then tossed my leather satchel in the back seat of his car and introduced him to my fiancée. "You must be crazy," she said, "to park on a sidewalk like this."

"That's what I get paid for," he said. "If I was sane we'd have to carry your bags all the way to the parking lot."

She eyed him warily as we began loading luggage. "Stand aside!" he barked at a child who had wandered in front of the car. "Do you want to be killed?"

The crowd fell back at that point. Whatever we were doing

was not worth getting killed for. The child disappeared as I trundled a big aluminum suitcase off the carousel, almost dropping it as I tossed it back to Skinner, who caught it before it could bounce and tucked it neatly into the back seat of the convertible.

The meter maid was writing another citation, our third in ten minutes, and I could see she was losing her grip. "I give you sixty seconds," she screamed. "Then I have you towed away!"

He patted her affectionately on the shoulder, then got in the car and started the engine, which came suddenly alive with a harsh metallic roar. "You're too pretty for this kind of chickenshit work," he said, handing her a card that he'd picked off his dashboard. "Call me at the office," he told her. "You should be posing for naked postcards."

"What?" she yelled, as he eased the car into reverse.

The crowd parted sullenly, not happy to see us escape. "Call the police!" somebody shouted. The meter maid was yelling into her walkie-talkie as we moved into traffic, leaving our engine noise behind.

Skinner lifted another bottle of Primo out of a small plastic cooler on the floor of the front seat, then steered with his knees while he jerked off the top and lit a cigarette. "Where to, Doc?" he asked. "The Kahala Hilton?"

"Right," I said. "How far is it?"

"Far," he said. "We'll have to stop for more beer."

I leaned back on the hot leather seat and closed my eyes. There was a strange song about "hula hula boys" on the radio, a Warren Zevon tune:

*... Ha'ina 'ia mai ana ka puana
Ha'ina 'ia mai ana ka puana ...*

*I saw her leave the luau
With the one who parked the cars
And the fat one from the swimming pool
They were swaying arm in arm ...*

Skinner stomped on the gas and we shot through a sudden opening to the inside, missing the tailgate of a slow-moving pineapple truck by six inches and swooping through a pack of mongrel dogs on their way across the highway. We hit gravel and the rear end started coming around, but Skinner straightened it out. The dogs held their ground for an instant, then scattered in panic as he leaned out of the car and smacked one of them on the side of the head with his beer bottle. He was a big yellow

brute with scrawny flanks and the long dumb jaw of a tenth-generation cur; and he had charged the GTO with the back-alley dumbness of a bully that had been charging things all his life, and always seen them back off. He came straight at the left front wheel, yapping wildly, and his eyes got suddenly huge when he realized, too late, that Skinner was not going to swerve. He braced all four paws on the hot asphalt, but he was charging too fast to stop. The GTO was going about fifty in low gear. Skinner kept his foot on the accelerator and swung the bottle like a polo mallet. I heard a muffled smack, then a hideous yelping screech as the beast went tumbling across the highway and under the wheels of the pineapple truck, which crushed it.

"They're a menace," he said, tossing the neck of the bottle away. "Utterly vicious. They'll jump right into your car at a stoplight. It's one of the problems with driving a convertible."

My fiancée was weeping hysterically and the warped tune was still coming out of the radio:

*I could hear their ukeleles playing
Down by the sea . . .
She's gone with the hula hula boys
She don't care about me*

*Ha'ina 'ia mai ana ka puana
Ha'ina 'ia mai ana ka puana . . .*

Skinner slowed down as we approached the exit to downtown Honolulu. "Okay, Doc," he said. "It's time to break out the drugs. I feel nervous."

Indeed, I thought. You murdering swine. "Ralph has it," I said quickly. "He's waiting for us at the hotel. He has a whole Alka-Seltzer bottle full of it."

He moved his foot off the brake and back to the accelerator as we passed under a big green sign that said "Waikiki Beach 1½." The smile on his face was familiar. The giddy, screw-headed smirk of a dope fiend ready to pounce. I knew it well.

"Ralph is paranoid," I said. "We'll have to be careful with him."

"Don't worry about me," he said. "I get along fine with the English."

We were in downtown Honolulu now, cruising along the waterfront. The streets were full of joggers fine-tuning their strides for the big race. They ignored passing traffic, which made Skinner nervous.

"This running thing is out of control," he said. "Every rich liberal in the Western world is into it. They run ten miles a day. It's a goddamn religion."

"Do you run?" I asked.

He laughed. "Hell yes, I run. But never with empty hands. We're *criminals*, Doc. We're not *like* these people and I think we're too old to learn."

"But we *are* professionals," I said. "And we're here to cover the race."

"Fuck the race," he said. "We'll cover it from Wilbur's front yard—get drunk and gamble heavily on the football games."

John Wilbur, a pulling guard on the Washington Redskins team that went to the Super Bowl in 1973, was another old friend from the white-knuckle days of yesteryear, who had finally settled down enough to pass for a respectable businessman in Honolulu. His house on Kahala Drive in the high-rent section was situated right on the course for this race, about two miles from the finish line. . . . It would be a perfect headquarters for our coverage, Skinner explained. We would catch the start downtown, then rush out to Wilbur's to watch the games and abuse the runners as they came by the house, then rush back downtown in time to cover the finish.

"Good planning," I said. "This looks like my kind of story."

"Not really," he said. "You've never seen anything as dull as one of these silly marathons . . . but it's a good excuse to get crazy."

"That's what I mean," I said. "I'm *entered* in this goddamn race." He shook his head. "Forget it," he said. "Wilbur tried to pull a Rosie Ruiz a few years ago, when he was still in top shape—he jumped into the race about a half mile ahead of everybody at the twenty-four-mile mark, and took off like a bastard for the finish line, running at what he figured was his normal 880 speed. . . ." He laughed. "It was horrible," he continued. "Nineteen people passed him in two miles. He went blind from vomiting and had to crawl the last hundred yards." He laughed again. "These people are *fast*, man. They ran right over him."

"Well," I said, "so much for that. I didn't want to enter this goddamn thing anyway. It was Wilbur's idea."

"That figures," he said. "You want to be careful out here. Even your best friends will lie to you. They can't help themselves."